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INDIAN ECCLESIOLOGY:
A REREADING OF THE PIONEERS

ROBERT DE NOBILI:
CHRISTIANITY IN THE INDIAN VERSION

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BRAHMABANDHAV UPADHYAYA:
A HINDU-CHRISTIAN

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SADHU SUNDAR SINGH:
CHURCH OF THE SADHU IDEAL

David C. Scott

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JEEVADHARA

The People of God

**INDIAN ECCLESIOLOGY:
A RE-READING OF THE PIONEERS**

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Editorial

One of our major theological concerns today is Indian Ecclesiology, no matter whether it is used in the singular or plural. An Indian understanding of the Church, its nature, mission and ministry, Indian articulations of its faith, dogmas, doctrines and worship, and ecclesial structures consonant with our society and culture are a must so that the Church may be firmly rooted in the Indian soil. Such a contribution is absolutely necessary for the catholicity of the Church, for the full flowering of the faith and the Gospel.

India's century-long struggle for political independence witnessed an Indian Christian Renaissance. Western forms of Christianity imported and transplanted in India were frowned upon and condemned as antinationalistic. A clear distinction was made by some of the pioneers between Christianity and its western cultural expressions. Indian versions of Christianity were envisaged and strongly advocated by the pioneers like Keshub Chunder Sen, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, Chenchaiiah, Chakkarai, Appasamy, Devanandan and others although all of them were not equally involved in the national freedom struggle. But once independence was gained, the echoes of these pioneers gradually vanished, and the Indian Churches by and large still remain totally unaffected by the movement for indigenous Christianity.

The Second Vatican Council gave a new impetus to reform, adaptation and inculturation. "Different Ways" of the individual and local Churches were officially recognized and endorsed as legitimate, complementary and even necessary. Today 25 years after the Council how do the

Indian Churches fare? They still appear to be, more or less, Roman, European, Anglican, Chaldean or Antiochean! Well, the Indian theologians are engaged in discussions on 'Theologizing in the Indian context', 'Search for an Indian Ecclesiology', 'Theological Education in India', 'Indian Theology of Liberation', 'Socio-cultural Analysis in Theologizing' and similar other themes. But are the Churches as a whole really grappling with these questions about our identity?

At this juncture, perhaps, it may be salvific to re-read our pioneers and to reflect upon their unaccomplished work towards an indigenous Christianity. This number of *Jeevadhara* is an invitation to our readers to a re-reading of some of them. We had planned to include studies on more of them, but regret that the plan has not been fully realized.

Robert de Nobili was perhaps the first to criticize the Portuguese missionary programme of planting western forms of Christianity in India which, he found, could only add one more caste — the *Paranghi*. At a time of the ascendancy of Brahminic supremacy de Nobili realized that Christ and his Gospel could enter the heart of India only through the Brahmins, and so he became a Brahmin sanyasi observing all the caste rules, declaring that one becomes a Brahmin not by birth but by his noble action. For de Nobili it was meant to be only a short term policy to win the entire masses who were fully controlled by them. He was bold enough to introduce the Gospel as the 'Fourth Veda' which was believed to be lost, and he dreamt of a day when Christianity could become one among the Indian religious systems with all the Hindu socio-cultural expressions. De Nobili's vision of an indigenous Christianity was perfectly right though some of the steps he took, like the complete acceptance of the caste system, is open to criticism.

Along with Swami Vivekananda, Keshub Chunder Sen and Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya were champions of the reform of Hindu religion and society attacking the caste system and all religious superstitions. K. C. Sen spoke of a desirable marriage between East and West where

they have to learn from one another. India's spirit of devotion and prayer must be combined with western 'practical righteousness' or social commitment on the basis of humanistic values. K.C. Sen finally believed that Christ alone who is an Asiatic and Oriental, could really unite East and West, creating a universal brotherhood, a harmony of all religions, peoples and races based on the two fundamental Gospel principles of love and self-sacrifice. This Universal Brotherhood he called 'The Church of the New Dispensation'. He was therefore skeptical of the historical Churches which divided humanity by its dogmas, doctrines, rituals and structures of authority, and he called all the Churches to give way to this Church of the future.

Brahmabandhav, on the other hand, did not speak of a completely new Church, but joined the Catholic Church and tried to give it an indigenous expression. He saw Christianity as the fulfilment or flowering of Hinduism and tried to make the wisdom, heritage and truths of Hinduism stepping stones to Christ. He wanted the recognition of the Hindu Scriptures or the Vedas as the 'Indian Old Testament', and the creation of an Indian Christian theology in the categories and language of our philosophical and religious traditions. He fully realized that the Indian Christian identity requires political independence and therefore he called all Christians to join the national struggle for freedom. Rightly he pointed out that the Christian faith has its foundations in the freedom struggle of Israel; God of the Bible is the one who sides with the people's struggles for freedom.

Sadhu Sundar Singh who did not belong to any Church and refused to found any new Church was quite a different model among the pioneers. He was a Christian mystic who enjoyed continuous communion with God and Christ and with the body of all believers. He challenged the Churches and Christians of his own time whether they, with all their dogmas, rituals and structures of authority, have the real personal experience of salvation in Jesus Christ, whether they have really met Jesus Christ at the

cave of their hearts. Real authority for him was one's personal inner experience and not any ecclesiastical tradition. Sadhu Sundar Singh might help us today to locate the heart of Christian unity in the fundamental Christian experience and thus to overcome our ecclesial and traditional differences by transcending them.

This re-reading of the pioneers of indigenous Christianity is not meant to copy their models here and now, but only to inspire us to have our own visions and dreams. It reminds us of our responsibility in creating an authentic Indian Church, a healthy and rich synthesis of our invaluable Indian heritage and Christian faith.

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Sadhu Sundar Singh: Church of the Sadhu Ideal

There can be no understanding of Sadhu Sundar Singh which does not somehow take account of his nearly childlike relations with God. Indeed, the Sadhu belongs to a category of naive spiritual personalities, not to the more reflective ones. His affinities are more with Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther than with Augustine, Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin. Although in his youth he was familiar with the theological and philosophical wisdom of his native land and although later he gave himself briefly to the study of Christian theology, neither his piety nor his message bears the mark of any particular philosophical or theological tendency. A purely intellectual speculation about the Ultimate Reality was far removed from him as was any attempt to reduce subjective experience to an ordered whole. Sundar Singh knew one kind of theology only, the *theologia experimentalis*, or perhaps it is truer to say that his only criterion in matters spiritual was personal experience of salvation. The wonderful peace which he had found in Jesus Christ was for him proof of the truth of God's revelation in Christ. The way to this peace is through deep and secret prayer. Since this led the Sadhu to salvation, he wanted to lead all others by the same road to that blessed goal. No dogma, no authority, whether of Scripture or of the Church, no theological speculation could establish any certainty and assurance of salvation; there would be no hope in anything save in the most personal experience of the individual. *Expertus sum* was the only proof that Sundar Singh could offer for the joyful assurance of his faith. *Experire* — that was the only advice he could offer to others.

Because the experience of the heart was for him the decisive element in the life of faith, the Sadhu recognized only one authority in the sphere of religion — the authority of believers who are in intimate personal touch with God. In the inner life of the spirit assistance is not to be had from able philosophers, or learned theologians, or accomplished ecclesiastics.

If we want to learn anything about religion we must turn to those who are "specialists" in this realm, to those who have tested in their own experience what religion really means. We do not expect an engineer to understand surgery, nor a surgeon to know about mechanics. What do theologians and philosophers and ecclesiastics know about the Divinity of Christ? Go instead to the 'specialists' in religion, prophets, and men of prayer¹.

There can be no question, then, but that Sundar Singh is a representative *par excellence* of a Christianity of personal experience. His basic conviction that the essence of the Christian life consists in personal experience, involving a thorough change of heart, conditioned throughout his understanding of God, Christ and the Church. While it would be valuable and interesting to trace this basic conviction through the whole range of his religious conceptions, our immediate concern is the Church.

True, the Sadhu's only recourse in this world was the experience of ecstasy, in which he saw Christ face to face, but for him this encounter was not, as was for many other mystics, a 'flight of the alone to the Alone'. For him ecstasy was not only to be in fellowship with Christ, but also with the host of blessed spirits who surround Christ's throne. In a very real sense, ecstasy for Sundar Singh was not only *communio Christi* but *communio sanctorum*. 'Here (in the third heaven)', he says, "is the true communion of the saints of which we speak in the Apostles' Creed". The Sadhu was no mere Christian individualist, feeling no need for fellowship. Rather, all his thoughts

1. Sundar Singh, *Reality and Religion*, Madras: C- L. S., 1968 p. 25

and feelings were governed by the experience of Christian fellowship. However, the Church to which his heart belonged was no visible institution on earth; it was rather the whole body of those who belong to Christ in heaven and on earth.

I belong to the Body of Christ, that is, to the true Church, which is no material building, but the whole corporate body of true Christians, both those who are living here on earth, and those who have gone into 'the world of light'².

From beginning to end, however, the Sadhu regarded the Church of Christ as the triumphant assembly of saints in heaven, hidden from our earthly vision, yet truly existent, the 'heavenly city Jerusalem'. Certainly this understanding of the Church in heaven was not new. Centuries ago it filled the hearts of persons like Clement of Alexandria and Augustine with holy joy. It resounds through the entire rich liturgical tradition of the Church. "In that mystery of Christ are present choirs of angels invisibly attending, the lowest is united with the highest, earth is joined with heaven, visible and invisible become one"³. But it is just these words of Gregory the Great which reveal the difference between the classical conception and the Sadhu's understanding of the Church. Sundar Singh did not share the conviction that the Church on earth, however imperfect, is a reflection, a foreshadowing, or even a preparation for the Church in heaven. He seemed either unable or unwilling to appropriate the conviction that a mysterious union is possible even now with the heavenly assembly and Church of the firstborn, and further that this is possible not only to specially favoured individuals through the medium of ecstatic experience, but to all Christians through the medium of sacramental symbolism.

Since the Sadhu's chief attention was concentrated

2. Friedrich Heiler, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1927, p. 201

3. *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1959, s. v. "Invisible Church, Visible Church", by A. T. Hanson.

on the heavenly assembly, and since for him the Church on earth was merely a number of individual Christians, he was never able to see any major significance in the institutional aspect of the Church, either from a theological, ecclesiastical, or sacramental perspective. Clearly, however, he did not totally disregard membership in "the organised Church on earth"; he himself, in his own opinion, was technically a member of the Anglican Church in India. "I have nothing against anyone becoming a member of an organized Church on earth. In this sense I myself am a member of the Church of England in India."⁴

Further, he accepted the existing Church order and showed this acceptance by the way in which he refused to baptise his own converts, whom he regularly sent to the nearest mission station. He always took a firm stand in this matter, maintaining that it was his duty to preach the Gospel, but not to baptise. Baptism must be left to the ordained clergy. A poignant example of this is to be seen in the Sadhu's refusal to baptise his father. For fourteen years following his own baptism, Sundar Singh prayed incessantly that his father might also become a "follower of the Lord Jesus Christ". It was, therefore, indeed a matter of profound joy and immense gratitude to God when Sher Singh said to his son, "You have opened my spiritual eyes and you must baptise me". But Sundar Singh remained true to his convictions in the matter, even though his own father died without receiving baptism from anyone⁵.

The Sadhu always expressed his respect for those who bore office in the Church. When, during his visit to England, he took leave of the Archbishop of Canterbury, he knelt before him to receive his blessing. When he wrote his book about his visions he particularly asked his diocesan bishop for a foreword. And it was only with

4. Excerpt from a letter Sundar Singh wrote to Prof. Friedrich Heiler quoted in A. J. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh: A Biography*, Madras: C. L. S. 1966, p. 139.

5. This may also be an indication that for the Sadhu, in the final analysis, the sacrament of baptism is not a *sine qua non* of salvation, of membership in the triumphant Church of Christ.

the express permission of his Metropolitan that he resigned his preacher's licence, after which the two continued in close friendship.

In this respect it is important to note that at that time Baron von Hugel, the renowned student of Christian mysticism and well-wisher of Sundar Singh, suggested that the Sadhu's search for a characteristically Indian expression of Christianity was a decisive factor in the resignation, which, he felt, was liberating him from a Church organization which was English, not Indian. Certainly this was a major element in the Sadhu's missionary motivation, deeply convinced as he was that the Christian faith would attract Indian women and men only if it was shared with them in Indian forms. "Indians greatly need the Water of Life, but they do not want it in European vessels."

But in spite of the outward respect he showed for Church authority, so far as he himself was concerned, he recognized no teaching authority, nor any kind of final Church discipline. The immediate inward revelation which he experienced in prayer and ecstasy was for him the only ground of certainty in matters of faith, in comparison with which both ecclesiastical dogma and theological speculation remained secondary.

There are not enough men within the Church who have a sufficiently deep spiritual experience to invest with final authority the ecclesiastical dogmas as they are now taught. Therefore I go straight to God Himself...⁶

A revelation which I have received in ecstasy is worth more to me than all traditional Church teaching. Ecclesiasticism and Christianity are not the same thing⁷.

Although the Sadhu was quite independent of outward Church authority in all his religious life, thought and work, he did recognize its pedagogical value for the majority of Christians. "As all are not mystics the authority of ecclesiastical tradition remains necessary for most men." Thus

6. *Reality and Religion*, p. 36

7. Sundar Singh *The Spiritual World*. Madras: C. L. S., 1974, p. 51

Sundar Singh, in effect, makes a distinction between two kinds of Christianity: a Church Christianity for the majority of Christians and a free Christianity for mystically inclined Christians who find their way to God along solitary paths. He makes his thought clear in a beautiful parable:

In the mountains the rushing streams make their own riverbeds along which they flow; but in the plains men have to work hard to make canals in order that the water may flow along them. It is just the same with those who live on the heights with God. The Holy Spirit streams through them freely, while those who give little time to prayer and communion with God have to find their way with much labour and effort⁸.

He goes on to explain:

So the new life at first makes its way through the lives of individual Christians but they feel no need of organising channels for it. But when it flows through whole communities, then they will organise channels or churches, for it to meet their needs. At that time the man-made sects will disappear, and there will be only one church of the living Christ, and there shall be 'one fold and one Shepard' (John 10:16)⁹.

In short, Sundar Singh's whole life and activity enforced one of his primary convictions: "ecclesiasticism and Christianity are not the same thing". It is true that in his complete independence of the visible Church there is a one-sidedness which cannot be considered normative for the ordinary Christian life. But on the other hand, it is striking to see how a Christian disciple, without any closer relationship with institutional religion, primarily on the strength of his free communion with Christ, was able to achieve great and wonderful things. The Sadhu's example warns us forcibly against all overestimation of ecclesiastical institutions and organizations. The salvation of the Church does not lie in organization nor in the assiduous cultivation of superficial Church fellowship. Again and again the

8. Sundar Singh, *With and Without Christ*, Madras. C. L. S., 1971, 63
 . *Ibid* .

Sadhu discovered that belonging to a Church and holding a correct attitude towards dogma in no way necessarily coincides with living fellowship with Christ.

There are many in the Christian Church who know a great deal about Christ, yet inwardly they are dried up; Christ does not live in their hearts. To many Christians Christ would say: 'I have a place in your churches, but I have no place in your hearts; you offer me an outward service in a church because you have never lived with me' ⁹.

Since the Sadhu recognised no ecclesiastical authority in his own life, but lived in 'unfettered communion' with his Redeemer, his religious life does not seem to have needed the help either of sacramental means of grace or of the fellowship of public worship. His ideal of prayer was not the liturgy of the Church, nor public worship in the company of believers, but rather the quiet prayer of the inner room or in the lonely solitude of the hills. However, his *sannyāsi* temperament was exhibited in greater clarity in his apostolic activity. Sundar Singh evangelised entirely alone, without any ecclesiastical *missio canonica*, and without any connection with a missionary society: "I do not belong to any special society; in this respect I am quite alone." While other great Indian religious men like Mahavira and Gautama, who had just as strong a tendency to solitude, founded Religious Orders, with which even an Order of Tertiaries, or a Lay Brotherhood, was connected; while Guru Nanak created a religious community; while Francis of Assisi, whom Sundar Singh honoured so very highly, called into existence a great *fraternitas*, the Sadhu never seems to have felt any desire to gather around himself a fellowship of like-minded people, who could help him in his difficult mission. "St. Francis felt himself called by God to found an Order, but I do not feel called to do so." In spite of the fact that a great many — Prof. Heiler estimates "some four hundred" — young men begged him to accept them as his *celas* he unrelentingly sent them away. As an itinerant preacher he

was usually alone, although now and then he may have fallen in with like-minded people with whom he travelled and preached to whoever would listen.

One reason for this may have lain in Sundar Singh's overweening idealism. He seems to have had great difficulty in dealing with imperfections, whether in the Church or in individuals. Certainly one of the factors which caused him to reject the Church and her authority was his keen awareness of how far short she falls of his highly spiritualised ideal, based on his own intense personal experience of the living Lord. In the course of correspondence with Prof. Heiler the Sadhu penned the following words regarding the Church:

I don't believe in the Apostolic Succession... The true spiritual succession has been interrupted several times, because not all Bishops and Popes were truly consecrated by the Holy Spirit; many of them were saints but not all. If the living Christ is really so near us and lives in our heart, why then should I reject the true kernel and cling to the dried-up outer shell?¹¹

His misgivings about making *celas* arose from a similar kind of perfectionism in the matter of the vocation of the *sādhū*.

Like frogs in the rainy season, several of them have sprung up. One or two seem to be doing good work, but the others are no good. Some of them give out falsely that they are sent by me. The Sadhu's calling is a high and noble one, much respected in India. That is why I do not feel called to train up sadhus in an ashram, as there is very great danger of their falling below the ideal¹².

Perhaps it was not so much his fear of failure in the matter of making *celas* as it was his seeming unwillingness to come to terms with authority, both that of another over him and that of his own over another. Baron von Hugel perceptively raised this issue, during Sundar Singh's life-

11. Quoted in Appasamy, *op. cit.*, p. 139

12. *Ibid.*, p. 232

time, in terms of Christian humility. The Baron felt that the Sadhu's humility was not complete until he was willing to accept the authority of others.

We can trace a certain incompleteness in a man's humility, so long as it consists of humiliation before God alone, and as it claims to derive all its religious help, without any mediation of the senses and of society, purely spiritually from the Infinite Pure Spirit alone. Complete humility imperatively demands my continuous recognition of my own multiform need of my fellow-creatures especially of those wiser and better than myself, and of my lifelong need of training, discipline, incorporation; full humanity requires filial obedience towards men and institutions, as well as fraternal give and take, and paternal authority and superintendence¹³

The need for a *guru* is firmly held by the older generation of Hindus, as by other Indians too, especially the Sikhs, the Jains, the Buddhists. Indeed, the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (VI. 12-14) makes clear the predominant view that without a *guru*, the seeker is like one blindfolded. By grace the *guru* enables the seeker to get direct knowledge of the Divine, purifies him or her from sin, and removes all darkness. In return the *guru* requires strict obedience — prompt, willing, without criticism or complaint. Authority — that is the secret of the relationship between the *guru* and the disciples. Sundar Singh seems never to have experienced this kind of relationship as a seeker and hence was unable to give it to others.

At the same time, it may well have been, as it would seem today also, that the clear and confident wielding of authority was something lacking in the Church of the Sadhu's time. There was, and is, too much authoritarianism, too much hesitation, too much fear. The Church in India today could well examine herself in this matter. Too frequently the Church seeks to enforce sterile conformity in belief and practice; too seldom does she encourage creative growth in the Christian life of the Spirit, awakened within the

3. Quoted in Heiler, *op. cit.*, p. 213

inner depths of the self, allowing each individual to develop according to his/her own potentialities.

In the Indian religious traditions, the life of the Spirit is invariably related to a lifestyle of poverty. This was an important element in Sundar Singh's vocation as a *sādhū*.

So the sixteen-year-old lad went out to his missionary wanderings as a sadhu with no possessions, without any protection. Besides his thin linen sacred robe and blanket... his only property was a New Testament in his mother tongue. He never begged; he depended upon alms given by kindhearted people... If he found no shelter, then he would sleep in a dirty inn, or in a cave or under the trees¹⁴.

The Sadhu was keenly aware of the fact that in Indian spirituality, those committed to God-seeking should live on necessities alone. He knew how liberating it is; how freeing, to concentrate on the 'One thing essential'. Among other things in this matter as well the Church of the Sadhu-ideal must continue to be inspired and guided by the example of Sundar Singh, who realized that the Church must be poor and humble not only in terms of bank-account or the social standing of her common folk, but in her whole life and; most especially in the life of her leaders, rich and powerful only in the Spirit.

Are not the demands of the Gospel regarding poverty and humble service ever compelling in India where the standard of living is so very low and the anxiety for the morrow is so very widespread? Certainly the Sadhu put himself in the direct line of the seventy-two sent by Jesus into mission without anything except a single cloth to cover their body, content with any food or accommodation they might find in the villages through which they would pass. Is this not in fact the real missionary rule given by Christ himself?

It was, I believe, Swami Abhishiktananda who had a

4. Heiler, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

dream of a 'pilot seminary' where young volunteers would come to be trained under one or two Christian *gurus*, live a simple ashram lifestyle and study the 'seed of the word', the Indian scriptures, in the light of the word. Several tentative efforts along these lines have been made involving some who have felt the need for such an experience in order to be more responsive to the Spirit and to be better able to meet the needs of the contemporary Indian Church. For such experiments to continue and to grow, much courage and vision are required. The way forward will undoubtedly involve tensions and problems, but these can only be solved by living them out. In anything worthwhile that is undertaken, there will be risks and dangers. If there is to be a creative response to the needs of the Indian Church today, not only must there be a willingness to make mistakes and to learn from them, there must be above all the courage to risk the "great danger of falling below the ideal". At certain important points in his ministry Sundar Singh seems to have lacked such courage. The Church in India today cannot afford to follow the Sadhu in this matter "for God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power" (II Tim. 1:7). We must, therefore "attempt great things for God and expect great things from God."

It is important to note, however, that the Sadhu's individualism merged into the universal spirit, which was perhaps more pronounced in Sundar Singh than in the experience of many other outstanding Christians. Just because he belonged to no particular sect or denomination, because as he says of himself, he belonged "to all those who belong to Christ", he was able to serve all with his message. "I am free to go everywhere; for me there are no ecclesiastical barriers." Indeed it is difficult to think of other instances in the history of the Church of a person of his calibre who preached the Gospel in so many churches and communities: among Nestorians and Jacobites, Syrians and Copts, among Anglicans and Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists, Lutherans and Reformed, Baptists and Quakers. And although the Roman Catholic Church refused him access to its pulpits, countless Latin

Christians undoubtedly sat at his feet to hear him bear witness to Christ.¹⁵

Because Sundar Singh experienced Christ as all in all, it seemed to him that the essential unity of all Christians should be an obvious fact. During a conversation with that great advocate of Christian unity, Archbishop Soderblom of Uppsala, he is reported to have observed: "In the deep places of the soul, and in prayer, all Christians are one... In Christ we all speak one language, which is sufficient for us all."¹⁵ Since his sense of this interior unity was so strong, he had no patience with the many divisions and differences within Christendom. Indeed, in his opinion the existence of so many different churches and confessions revealed a remnant of the caste spirit in Christianity. Sundar Singh thought and lived in the great vision of Christian unity. But, for him, this unity was something purely interior and spiritual, rooted in Christ and hence he had no faith in external attempts to federate or fuse different churches into one.

However, one doubts that were Sundar Singh's pure devotion to Christ alive in all Christians, the external path would be open to unity and to a unity in faith. To the divided Church, with conflicting denominations, the Sadhu stands as a perpetual exhortation to unity. Not only was he an example of Christian love but he demonstrated that the unity of the entire Christian people is not to be attained primarily along the path of uniformity and organization but through communion with Christ.

While the Sadhu's individualism led him to the universal spirit it also directed his spiritual path in another direction. Sundar Singh spoke continually of the ever living Christ. Indeed, the parting words of the Risen Lord, "Lo! I am with you always, even to the end of the world" were very dear to him, and he quoted it constantly. But he saw this endless life going forward solely in the lives of individuals, and not in the wider fellowship of Christians. There can

15. Quoted in Heiler, *op.cit.*, p. 208.

however be no denying, as we have previously observed, that the Sadhu's attitude towards the Church was one-sided. Perhaps this can be explained by his religious roots in the individualistic spiritual world of the pervasive Hindu tradition and his early and determinative contacts with the more individualistic forms of Christianity, i.e., the Protestant of Presbyterianism and Low Church Anglicanism, so that in him Protestant and Hindu individualism met and actually strengthened each other. However, Sundar Singh's personality was so rich, so deep, so loving that, one wonders whether it could have been more attractive had it been more ecclesially oriented. At the same time there can be little disagreement about the manner in which the deep and rich personal piety of men and women throughout the history of the Church has been balanced and fulfilled by their sense of the Living Church as the mystical Body of Christ and the communion of the saints. Somehow they represent a more complete ideal than that which was given to the Sadhu either to perceive or to live out. But again there is the question of where he could have found the Church in whose fellowship he could carry out his high calling as a *sadhu*. Is it too much to say that neither the Anglican nor the Presbyterian nor the Roman Catholic Church could possibly have been his spiritual home? Probably in none of them could the Sadhu have exercised his Apostolic vocation in the large and all-embracing way he worked on the subcontinent. Perhaps it was not so much the fault of the Sadhu, as of the Christian Churches, that he was not able to grasp the fuller meaning and significance of the Church.

In another, though not unrelated context, we have already suggested that in the life of the Church there is too much interference, curtailing of inner freedom. In the overweening concern with law and order the inner freedom of the religious vocation tends to be forgotten, together with its charism. Swami Abhishiktananda reminds us that many saintly religious and monks are afraid to become priests:

The sadhu has no obligation towards society in terms

of things that can be seen or measured. He is not a priest whose duty is to pray and make offerings on behalf of mankind... Still less is he a social worker, for he does not share in the political or economic life of society... Society's claim on the individual tends to be even more exacting than it was in the time of primitive tribalism when personal existence was barely distinguishable within the consciousness of the group... The sannyasi is the outward expression of man's ultimate freedom in his innermost being; his existence and his witness are vitally necessary for human society, whether secular or religious¹⁶.

The Church of the sadhu ideal, then will be among other things the Church which not merely tolerates, but encourages and makes possible the apostolic vocation of the *sadhu/sannyasi*, which is beyond all *dharma*, beyond the externals of religion. When the *sādhu* ideal, the ideal of the person moved by the Spirit, awakened within the self, becomes more prevalent in the Church there can be little doubt that the people of India will become more attentive to the Gospel she is charged to share. The world will again start to hearken to the Church.

This is so, because the Spirit is at work everywhere, dwells in the depth of every human heart. The Spirit who calls and waits, can neither force nor abandon individuals, but allows them to develop, each according to his/her own capabilities, until Christians finally offer the Gospel message with simplicity at the level of interiority where the Spirit waits. Surely this is at the very heart of the Church of the *sādhu* ideal, the way to which has been indicated by Sadhu Sundar Singh.

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16. Abhishiktananda, *The Further Shore* Delhi: I S.P.C.K., 1975, pp. 13-14.

Keshub Chunder Sen: The Church of the New Dispensation

It is a well acknowledged fact that in the emergence of 'Hindu' or 'Indian Renaissance' of the 19th century, modern western secular religious values did play a very decisive role. It is true many radical young intellectuals of Bengal turned out to be liberal Anglicists guided as they were by such western liberals as David Hare. They renounced many Indian socio-cultural values and Hindu religion itself as obscurantist and irrational. But there were many others who, inspired by the examples of people like Raja Rammohan Roy, looked to western enlightenment and Christian religion as sources for reforming and renewing Hindu religion and society from within. They longed for a healthy marriage between the East and West; looked forward to an era in which the genuine Indian heritage would shine forth with added lustre when illumined by the fresh light from the West.

The quest for a marriage, between the East and the West, of the Indian religious ethos and the religion of Christ is strikingly evident in many of the attempts to interpret Christianity as fulfilment of Hinduism as well as in attempts to 'Orientalize' Christ and Christianity. The words and actions of such Indian Christians as Lal Behari Day, K.C. Banerjea, J.G. Shome, Parani Andi, K.M. Banerjea, A.S. Appasamy stand out in this respect. Manilal C. Parekh is even more a forceful exponent of this vision. It is interesting to note that, for Parekh, Keshub Chunder Sen who refused to join any Christian denomination, was a great inspiration. Sen was perhaps the first Indian to perceive clearly the positive implications of bringing about a harmony

between the Indian religious values and the spiritual content of the religion of Christ. His *Nava Vidhan* or now the 'Church of the New Dispensation' was a serious attempt to put into action his vision of uniting all religions in Jesus Christ.

A Man of a New Vision in the making

The life and work of K. C. Sen (A.D 1838-84) may be divided into four phases: 1) From his birth to the time of his joining the Brahma Samaj (1838-57); 2) From this year to the first split of Brahma Samaj (1864); 3) From the first to the second split (1878); 4) From this event to his death (1884). It is during the last phase of his life that the idea of *Nava Vidhan* matured and took the definite form of a new movement. Yet some of the ideas implied in this movement find clear expression from at least 1866 onwards. From his childhood till he started his studies in the Vidyalaya, he was brought up strictly in traditional Hinduism in the orthodox family environment. He publicly declared while in England in 1870: 'I was born a Hindhu, and in my early days I thought and felt and lived as a Hindu, going through all the rites and ceremonies of idolatry'¹

The period between 1859 and 1864, with Keshub initiating a number of new ventures, became the seedbed of a renewed Brahmo ideology. After the first split Keshub and his young and progressive followers entered upon a more profound study of Christ and Christianity. But it is after the second split that Keshub came out more clearly with the supreme importance given to Christ in his new vision of a national and universal religion. This together with a full awakening to the traditional values of Hinduism, which had been in a dormant state gave shape to his new religion which found a concrete expression in the *Nava Vidhan* or Church of the New Dispensation — the final evolution of his vision of the Brahma Samaj — which he solemnly inaugurated in 1879.

1. David C. Scott., ed. *Keshub Chunder Sen: A Selection*, (Library of Indian Christian Theology, Companion Volume Series No. 1), Bangalore: United Theological College, 1979, p. 138.

The Evolution of the Vision

One early influence on Keshub's life was the Vishnuite devotion of his father, Piari Mohan who died when the boy was ten years old. The Vishnuite bhakti had been popularized in Bengal by the 16th century sage Krishna Chaitanya. This legacy from his family tradition together with most aspects of Hindu faith and practice was relegated to a dormant state in Keshub from his college days. But what he had imbibed from his mother, Sarada Devi, a quest for universal religious harmony and the spirit of tolerance always remained with him as a driving force. It is this maternal inheritance which eventually became the basis of his universal vision of a superreligion and found its concrete embodiment in his *Nava Vidhan*.

How far the ideas and visions of Ram Komul Sen influenced him, we cannot say for certain. This gentleman, a recent member of the Sen family, took keen interest in working with those British Orientalists whose aim was to revitalize India from within. Sen definitely showed traits similar to theirs on several occasions.

At the age of seven Keshub joined the Vidyalaya (the Hindu College) of Calcutta. Except for a brief period spent in the Hindu Metropolitan College, he had all his education in the Vidyalaya which he left in 1859. As in the case of most other students who studied in that liberal institution of the Anglicists he also became not only disillusioned with Hinduism but was forced to give up his ancestral faith resulting in alienation from family and the orthodox relatives. "In course of time English education upset my faith. . . ."² It created a vacuum in his being. Unlike many of his companions he seems to have been inspired to take to prayer to overcome the crisis. Perseverance in prayer³ and his joining the Brahma Samaj brought him peace and joy⁴.

2. Scott, *op.cit.*, p. 138.

3. Cf. *Ibid.*, P. 139.

4. A short or long period given to mental depression, melancholy and taciturnity followed such crises in Keshub's life. This was the first such crisis.

Whether he had already familiarised himself with Christianity, whether Christian ideas and ideals helped him to get over the crisis is not quite clear. When later he describes this experience of his life he does use terms and concepts, not familiar to Hinduism, but marked by Christian influence. This does not necessarily mean that during the actual experience of the depression he had already become familiar with Christian ideas. It may be a projection of the Christian ideas he made his own in later years.

A renewed Brahmo ideology

Whether influenced or not by Christian ideas it was his joining the Brahmo Samaj in 1857 that brought an end to his depression and melancholy although his alienation from family continued to intensify. Under Debendra Tagore as his guide and mentor he began developing as if a new identity. It was in 1859 he completed his studies and left the college. From this time onwards he got himself fully involved in the activities of the Samaj. By enunciating a number of his original ideas and ideals he brought new life to the Samaj which was in a state of stagnation after the initial spirit of enthusiasm had died out. Through the organization of a few new institutions like the *Brahma Vidyalaya* (a sort of informal theological college established in 1859), the *Sangat Sabha* (a religious society partly resembling a Methodist class meeting, started in 1860) and through various writings such as *Brahma Dharma Anusthan* (Brahmo Religious Practice, a series of articles published in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*⁵ in 1861), the series of *The Tracts for the Times*, Keshub brought into Brahmoism a new emphasis and orientation⁶.

Though Keshub had probably been introduced to Christ, Christianity and Christian ideas earlier, it was during the years 1859 to 1864 that he entered upon a

5. The Bengali Organ of the Brahmo Samaj

6. Cf. Scott, op.cit., pp. 9-11; Cf. also J.N. Fraquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, (Indian Edition) New Delhi; Munshiram Manoharlal, 1977, p.41f.

careful study of the Bible and the writings of some prominent theists. Christian ethical and theistic nuances, not completely different from the ideas of Raja Rammohan Roy are evident in the writings of these years. It is significant that he refers not to Hindu but non-Hindu sources in these writings, especially in the *Tracts*.

The New Ideology and a split

Though Debendra Nath was inspired by the dynamism shown by the young Keshub to follow the path laid out in the *Brahma Dharmer Anusthan*, most of the older generation of the Brahmos could not commit themselves to the more radical ideals of Keshub which demanded a definite break with caste and 'idolatry', a break with Hindu society in which they wanted to remain. Not only this new demand for complete break with traditional Hindu practices but the Christian-inspired nuances in the ideas of Keshub were too much for this conservative group. The Samaj was heading for a split and it came in 1864. The split gave Keshub a new freedom and he came out all the more strongly, to emphasize his principles. It also necessitated the introduction of a new and appealing way of life to keep together the younger, progressive Brahmos who followed him.

Following the 1864 split in the Brahma Samaj Keshub experienced a trauma to get over which he with his intimate followers retired to a secluded place. There they devoted themselves to a deep study of contemporary European thought characterized by a new interest in the personality and humanity of Jesus more than in his divinity. One such study was *Ecce Homo* of J. R. Stealy. It emphasized Jesus' moral teaching. Keshub was impressed by this book and grew in his esteem for Jesus and Christian ethics. It is the ethical and social aspects of Christianity which governed the Brahma ideal during the sixties and seventies.

Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia — towards a harmony

The first point Keshub makes in a lecture on 'Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia' is the working of "an All-Wise

and All-Merciful Providence' in relating India to the enlightened nations of the West through missionary agency, and particularly in entrusting the interests of India "to the hands of a Christian sovereign", i. e., of England. After having described the various advantages of the British and European connections brought about by Providence, Keshub emphasizes the opportunity provided by this arrangement for effecting a harmony between the West and the East.

Christ an Asiatic

Another point that is emphasized in the lecture is the importance of Christ and Christianity for Asia, and consequently for India. Being Asiatic in origin Christ's religion has special relation to India, and being of an exalted nature it has a universal appeal. So in Christ East and West can easily be united.

After alluding to the vilification of the national character by narrow minded westerners Keshub shouts with a sense of legitimate pride and joy in being an Indian, an Asiatic:

And was not Jesus Christ an Asiatic? Yes, and his disciples were Asiatics, and all the agencies primarily employed for the propagation of the Gospel were Asiatic. In fact, Christianity was founded and developed by Asiatics, and in Asia. When I recollect on this, my love for Jesus becomes hundredfold intensified; I feel him nearer to my heart, and deeper in my national sympathies. Why should I then feel ashamed to acknowledge that nationality which he acknowledged? Shall I not rather say he is more congenial and akin to my Oriental nature, more agreeable to my Oriental habits of thought and feeling? And is not true that an Asiatic can read the imageries and allegories of the Gospel, and its descriptions of natural sceneries, of customs and manners, with greater interest, and a fuller perception of their force and beauty, than Europeans? In Christ we see not only the exaltedness of humanity; but also the grandeur of which Asiatic nature is susceptible. And

thus in Christ, Europe and Asia, the East and the West, may learn to find harmony and unity.

He goes on decrying the denationalization tendency so common among Indian Christians. He sincerely beseeched them not to confound the spirit of Christianity with the fashions of Western civilization. May they aspire to the glory of following the example of their great master, who, though he inculcated catholic truth for all mankind, was not ashamed to live and die a simple and poor Asiatic⁷.

A universal and transcendent religion

Keshub sees the religion of Christ as a universal religion but capable of assuming national and regional forms — in fact the first expression of it was Asiatic. Already there is a strong hint towards what Keshub was moving. He is groping for something which is perhaps unconsciously taking shape in his mind: the Church of the New Dispensation, the *Nava Vidhan* which he would announce some 12 years later, a Church which would be in his conception the Indian Church of Christ, the Indian expression of the universal and transcendent religion of Christ.

The most important emphasis in the lecture is on the universal and transcendent character of Christ's religion which alone has the potential to unite East and West, the whole human race in spiritual harmony and concord. Christ spoke not as worldly men speak, in the accommodating spirit of prudence: He preached absolute religion. He disdained everything local, contingent, sectarian and partial, and taught God's universal truth for the benefit of all mankind, Europeans and Asiatics alike⁸. Considering the dogmas and ethics of the Christian Churches as limitations and even distortions Keshub went to the source, the Bible, to draw the authentic character of Christ's religion. He became thus convinced that Christ's teachings find response in the universal consciousness of humanity, and are

7. Scott, *op.cit.* pp. 64, 65.

8. *Ibid.*, 66.

no more European than Asiatic, and that in his ethics, 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision or uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond or free'. He found out that two outstanding doctrines or principles of the Gospel were charity and self-sacrifice.

And, on the basis of these principles may brotherly intercourse and co-operation be established between them and my countrymen. Oh! for the day when race-antagonism shall perish, and strife, discord, and all manner of unbrotherly feeling shall for ever pass away, and harmony shall prevail among us all! May England and India, Europe and Asia, be indissolubly united in charity and love, and self-denying devotion to truth!¹⁰

Keshub saw clearly that there was absolute need that India and England, Europe and Asia, East and West should come together. The political unity that had been achieved between India and Britain was the providential arrangement of God to bring them together. He became progressively convinced that there was no other way to bring them nearer and thus bring about a true harmony between the East and West, than to take them nearer to Jesus Christ, who was neither of the East nor of the West, or who, so far identified entirely with Europeans, was an Asiatic of Asiatics.

Manilal C. Parekh thinks that perhaps by this time Keshub had already formed a unique conception of Christ and Christianity, and his own mission as an apostle thereof for India, if not for Asia. There is not the least doubt that he had much more in mind though it did not amount to orthodox Christianity. Parekh quotes from a letter Keshub wrote to Mozoomdar immediately after the lecture, "Of course, I have my own ideas about Christ, but I am not bound to give them out in due form, until altered circumstances of the country gradually develop them out of my mind"¹¹.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

11. Parekh, *op cit.*, p. 30.

Great Men': basis of harmony

Such high praises paid to the founder of the Christian religion, never before heard in the precincts of the Brahma Samaj, naturally estranged further the disaffected persons and the misunderstanding widened. Keshub concluded that India was not ripe for Christ. He himself needed more time to come to develop fully the dimensions of Christ's personality and his religion. As misunderstandings and misinterpretations of his ideas were on the increase, he gave, in the same year, another lecture: 'Great Men'¹² to clarify his position. He knew speculation had risen to a high pitch about his intentions: He was on the verge of joining the Christian Church. So he was particularly cautious and circumspect in choosing his words. Christians perceived this as a concealed repudiation of his pro-Christian sentiments. What perhaps moved Keshub was his conviction that the time for preaching Christ had not come. So he remained particularly silent on the subject for nearly thirteen years¹³.

Whatever be the motive of Keshub in delivering the lecture: 'Great Men', its relevance to his ideas of a future Church is not negligible. In the providence of God the "Great Men" of history — "the Representative Men, Geniuses, Prophets, Reformers and Redeemers", like Luther, Mohammed and John Knox are special dispensations, to meet the pressing needs of humanity. They have further a representative character: they represent their country and age, and specific ideas.

And though Jesus Christ, the Prince of the Prophets, effected greater wonders, and did infinitely more good to the world than the others, and deserves therefore our profoundest reverence, we must not neglect that chain, or any single link in that chain of prophets that preceded him, and prepared the world for him; nor must we refuse honour to those who coming after him, have carried on the blessed work of human

12. Scott, *op.cit.*, pp. 73-100.

13. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 17f; Parekh, *op.cit.*, p.31.

generation of human regeneration for which he lived and died. Let sectarianism perish, then. Let denominational and geographical boundaries be for ever forgotten, and let all nations unite in celebrating a universal festival in honour of all prophets, regarding them as the Elder Brothers of the human race!¹⁴

Brahma Samaj of India

The split in the Brashma Samaj was complete when Keshub and his young progressive group separated themselves from Debendranath Tagore and founded the 'Bharata Varshiya Brahma Samaj' (or the 'Brahma Samaj of India'). This was a month or two after the lecture: 'Great men,' was delivered. The new Samaj was established specifically to enshrine the vision of eclecticism and reverence for all great men of whatever race or country or creed. The two lectures of 1866 'Jesus Christ Europe and Asia' and 'Great Men' and the Brahma Samaj of India belong according to Parekh, to a single train of thought. Keshub's sole desire was to unite in the Church of his own vision all races and peoples in one Brotherhood. Recognizing the common Fatherhood of God and having common property in all the great men of the world, the "Elder Brothers" of the human race, they may no more know any of those distinctions which had divided them so far. In order that he might realize this end, he made the Brahma Samaj of India in its religious character no more ethnic, but eclectic, and looking up for all its motive power and moral dynamics to all great men with Jesus Christ as their head!¹⁵

Bhakti Recaptured

While Keshub began to be absorbed in a sort of Christ-centred mysticism and faith even his intimate colleagues who followed him into the new Samaj were left in a mood of uncertainty, incapable of rising up to the level of his spiritual tempo. To remedy the situation Keshub turned to the devotional methods of traditional Bengal.

14. See, *op cit.* p. 28.

15. Cf. Parekh: *op cit.* p. 34f.

Vishnuism. A dominant *bhakti* mood was created with *sankirthanams* (devotee seated for hours, singing hymns in praise of Sri Krishna, until they lost themselves in ecstasy and love), *nagarkirtanas* (town-praise: marching through the streets, dancing and singing with such contagious joy and holy rapture, that the whole town would be swept along on the tide of devotion). All day *Brahmo-tsvas* was another feature¹⁶.

The Future Church

The Vishnuite *bhakti* which Keshub had inherited from his father and which had been lying dormant in him was thus aroused and joined to the new mysticism or 'faith' he was now developing for himself and for the Samaj. It did a great deal to revitalize the flagging morale of the members of the Samaj and keep them together for at least a few years. It further helped the mission tours Keshub and his zealous colleagues undertook during this period, to be a great success. A new *bhakti* fervour seized men and women who came in contact with the Brahmo missionaries.

In the beginning of 1869 Keshub's lecture took up the theme of 'The Future Church'¹⁷. It was a sort of theology of the Church, the vision of which was growing in his mind. He emphasized the need for evolving a future church, its national and universal character, its relation to Christianity. The love of freedom, the chief characteristic of the present age acts on religion also. A strong desire to enfranchise the spirit has "unsettled men's faith in old doctrines and dogmas, and shaken their respect for authority". They are anxiously looking forward to, and speculating about the probable Church of the Future, wherein they hope to find truth and peace. The "past cannot be the ruler of the present and the theology of the present day must give way to something higher and better, and more in keeping with the advanced state of men's intelligence".

16. Cf. Scott, *op.cit.*, pp. 14-22; J.N. Farquhar, *op.cit.*, pp. 47, 293,

7. Text in Scott, *op.cit.*, pp. 101-120.

There is another reason equally important which calls for a new Church. Not only "each person is naturally guided by his own peculiar ideas, convictions, and inclinations" but "each religious sect concludes that its dogmas and doctrines will prevail at last. It is of great importance to theology to harmonize, if possible, such conflicting opinions and hopes... It must be admitted that the future and the past both influence our life and conduct. Hope is a mighty motive of action as the lessons suggested by experience. Every believer should be assured that his church has not only a glorious past, but also glorious future. The true church must be the future church. Hence the need to decide the interesting question of the future of the church of the world.

The future church is defined as both indigenous and universal. "The future church of India must be thoroughly an Indian Church. The future religion of the world will be the common religion of all nations, but in each nation it will have an indigenous growth, and assume a peculiar and distinctive character... No country will borrow or mechanically imitate the religion of another country; but from the depths of the life of each nation its future church will naturally grow up."

In many ways Keshub and the Brahma Samaj of India were steadily gaining popularity both in India and abroad. The whole development culminated in the consecration of the newly built Bharata-Varshiya Brahma Mandir (or the Brahma Mandir of India) on 22 August 1869 - "a harmonious blend of the Hindu, the Gothic, the Buddhistic and Saracenic styles of architecture"¹⁸. Parekh says that it was a day of great triumph for him. Immediately after this he decided to make a trip to England for which invitations from his friends, particularly from the former Viceroy Lord Laurence, had been standing.

In England

In England Keshub had a busy schedule giving a

18. Cf. P.K. Sen - *Keshub Chunder Sen*, Calcutta: Keshub Birth Centenary Committee, 1938, p.72

number of lectures, meeting important people, and establishing new friendships and so on. Perhaps the most important talk he gave was, 'Christ and Christianity'¹⁹. In it he made it a point to clearly differentiate Christ and Christianity. Parekh thinks that Keshub was at the same time in all likelihood defining the true mission of his own life. His reputation as a great religious reformer was high both in India and England at this time. This might have led him to think that he had a special mission, not only in India, but for the whole world. Even the idea of the New Dispensation may not have been far from his mind. There are clear traces in what he says regarding John the Baptist and the Holy Ghost: John the Baptist paved the way for Christ. Another John Baptist is needed now to pave the way for the Spirit of God²⁰.

According to Mozoomdar the most original impression Keshub produced among the most thoughtful in England was the possible formation of an Asiatic Christianity:

The spirituality, imaginativeness, faith, enthusiasm, and asceticism, of the East could never be bound within the cold creeds and catechisms of Europe. When they witnessed the profusion of this warm Asiatic impulse in Keshub's utterances and character, found him to be the leader of a young, growing, abounding Church, found besides the genuineness and depth of his attachment to the Messianic ideal of Jesus, they felt, more perhaps than they cared to express, that the future of the world's religion lay in the East, and not in the West²¹.

On the eve of his departure from England Keshub wrote to a friend of his:

The East and the West will unite; such is God's will. The signs of the times greatly encourage me, and my visit to this country has clearly convinced me that it is possible to make the world our home, and to love all

19. Scott, *op cit.*, pp. 138-53

20. Cf. Parekh, *op.cit.*, pp. 46-48.

21. Quoted in Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 50f.

as brothers and sisters. God's Spirit is working everywhere. Blessed is he who sees the work and realizes the Divine Spirit²².

After having succeeded in raising India, even the whole of East, in the estimation of the English elite, Keshub returned to India more confirmed in his Asiatic and Indian identity than before. He became all the more convinced that England had to learn much from India, as India from England, or the West from the East, and the East from the West. England must accept from India "the very spirit of devotion and prayer which Jesus Christ tried to inculcate... Let India... learn from England practical righteousness. Let England learn from India faith and prayer."²³

A big step forward to new dispensation

Since his lecture on "Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia" delivered in 1866 and the different reactions it provoked, Keshub had been feeling that he needed further to clarify to himself the meaning for, and relevance to India, of Christ and Christ's religion and proclaim it to the Indian people. All through the years from 1866 onwards he had been studying and reflecting on the matter, and practising asceticism and prayer in order to realize his ideas in life. With the visit to England and the reputation he came to enjoy at that time in India and abroad as a great religious reformer made him all the more convinced that he was called by God for a special mission to carry out in India and in the world at large through the realization of a new Church. After the return from England he tried to develop the humanitarian and social dimension of the Samaj in the light of what he thought India had to learn from England: practical righteousness. While being engaged thus, he opened his eyes wider on some of the defects of the Brahma Samaj of India. Many of the Brahmos among Keshub's followers appeared to remain 'worldly' concentrating on

22. Quoted in Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

23. Lecture in Bombay on return; quoted in Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

the humanitarian and social reform, and neglecting the religious core of the movement which in the estimation of Keshub, was the most important element and was to be the powerful catalyst in the reform of his vision. All this created a situation which demanded a new action programme and posed a new challenge to the great religious reformer. Keshub faced the challenge and launched a definite course of action from 1873 onwards which culminated in the formal announcement of the *Nava Vidhan* or the 'Church of the New Dispensation' in 1875 and its further development — ideological and practical — in the following years.

In a public lecture delivered in 1873 Keshub chose 'Inspiration'²⁴ (which he would call *adesh* or divine command) as its topic and tried to clarify further his position with regard to the new Church which was in the making under his leadership in the Brahmo Samaj. By inspiration 'The Divine Spirit takes full possession of man, and reigns supreme over all his thoughts, feelings, words and deeds... all that is in him is of the Lord'²⁵. The obvious implication was that the members of the Samaj were bound to accept the leadership of Keshub being a man thus inspired by the Spirit. But this implication was only vaguely hinted at this time.

In 1875 Keshub took a great step further when he proclaimed explicitly for the first time a special Dispensation in his lecture "Behold the Light of Heaven in India"²⁶. According to David C. Scott in this lecture Keshub's ideas took a more insistent, definite and personal form. For the first time the term 'New Dispensation' was used by him to mean an era of salvation especially granted to India by the Divine Providence, in the achievement of which the British rule had a crucial role to play²⁷. The bright, the beautiful "heavenly light in the midst of India" that "ascends, extends and expands day to day" is "the light of the New Dispensation vouchsafed by the Providence for India's

24. K.C. Sen; *Lectures in India*; Calcutta, 1886. pp. 26-51.

25. David C. Scott, *op.cit.*, p.27

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-97

27. *Ibid.*, p.27

salvation"²⁸. In the opinion of Manilal C. Parekh the lecture formed a landmark in the spiritual history of the Bengali reformer's life as well as that of Brahma Samaj. The universal inspiration which had taken hold of him began to come out as something concrete. Though the word 'New Dispensation' occurs several times, yet Parekh considers the lecture as only a prophetic prelude to his later proclamation of the New Dispensation. It lays the foundation for the Church of the New Dispensation and gives a new character to his movement which would enable him more free to evolve and execute the new idea in any way he liked when the opportune time arrived. "The seed was sown here, and its growth into a living plant was only a question of time."²⁹

In any case it is important to note some of the attempts Keshub makes to harmonize the messages of Hindu Rishis expressed in such words as, *satyam* and the revelation of God as 'I am' in the Old Testament, the 'Paramatman', the supreme spirit of the Hindus with the Holy Spirit of Christians. The way he did this might have been naive, but the intention was clear: he wanted to emphasize the point of harmony of Religions, especially of Hinduism and Christianity which would be the most important feature of his New Dispensation³⁰.

The new emphasis on the spiritual and mystical, especially Keshub's idea of the *adesh* had already provoked severe criticism from many of his Brahmos. He was accused of taking an egotistic stand, claiming special inspiration. Quite aware of this reaction Keshub was cautious not to project his image unnecessarily and denied all claims to being a leader. But at the same time he made it absolutely clear that nothing could impede his work, because it was God's work³¹.

28. Cf. Beginning of the Lecture, *ibid.*, pp.170

29. Parekh, *op cit.*, pp. 62, 63f.

30. Cf. *ibid.*, p.65

31. Scott, *op.cit.*, p.27

The second split and the emergence of the new dispensation

The criticisms did not cease and there was every sign that another split in the Samaj was inevitable. Keshub had been by this time fully convinced that the time had come for a further move from his old and new moorings. In the words of Parekh, 'He was gradually gravitating more and more towards those vast reservoirs of spiritualities of both orthodox Hinduism and Christianity, and in exact proportion to his doing this he was going further and further from both the old Brahma Samaj of Maharshi Devendra Nath Tagore, and a large number of his own nominal followers who were too rationally minded and too much after social and secular reforms to care for all these new developments which were now being sprung upon them with an ever-increasing rapidity, and which they thought were all for the worse'³². Keshub seems to have realized that not much remained common to him and many of his followers, and things were moving towards a crisis. While they felt that the break with 'superstitious' Hinduism was never to be breached, he was for a more positive and constructive *rapprochement* with the old faiths, both Hinduism and Christianity. Orthodox Hindus and Christians were 'elder brothers'³³.

From 1875 Keshub threw himself into the midst of a great revival. Asceticism was duly emphasized and for the practice of it he bought a garden which he called *Sadhan Kanan* ('Fresh Abode of Religious Culture'). Together with asceticism (*vairagya*), inspiration (*adesh*) and *yoga* or communion formed the principal factors in the new forward movement. The notion of inspiration was developed in a special way. What at first he called the voice of conscience finally became 'inspiration', the voice of an 'invisible Person' living within. While the notion of *adesh* evolved, Keshub also took up the four well-known systems of *Sadhana* (spiritual culture) - *Jnana*, *Bhakti*, *Yoga* and *Seva* (the name he gives for *karma*) and perfected them

32. Parekh, *op cit.*, p. 68

33. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 70

to suit his vision of religion, the Universal Religion of Harmony, his New Church.

Not content with the practical methods of harmonizing religions, he launched a programme of a deep and objective study of four main religious traditions: Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Muslim. P.C. Mazoomdar, entrusted with the study of Christianity produced his famous book, *The Oriental Christ* in which he emphasized the 'Oriental' or Asiatic character of Jesus and his teachings, an important aspect of the 'New Dispensation'. Gour Govind Roy who made researches on Hinduism went deep into the idea of the Harmony of Religions, the other, the universal pole of the New Dispensation. The result of all these undertakings was an ever-widening of the horizon of Keshub's vision and of his religious synthesis³⁴.

This wider vision and synthesis helped Keshub to successfully tide over a new crisis in the Samaj brought to its zenith by the marriage of his daughter in 1878 to the heir apparent of Kuch Bihar in northern Bengal, which is known as 'Kuch Bihar Marriage Case'. It gave rise to a public controversy. It was alleged that the marriage contravened the minimum age prescription of the 1872 Native Marriage Act and it was not a pure Brahmo marriage as it condoned 'idolatry'. Whatever be the merit of the allegation, the opportunity was seized by the party hostile to Keshub to break away from him and organize what is known as 'Sadharan Brahmo Samaj' on 15 May 1878³⁵.

The split had initially a very depressing effect on Keshub and according to Parekh "permanently undermined his health, and may have even hastened his death". But one clear result of the split and the consequent trauma experienced by Keshub and his dozen or two ardent followers was the emergence of a new Samaj which he christened 'The Church of Nava Vidhan'. He wrote to Max Mueller in 1881: "The great result of all this agitation is

34. Cf. Parekh, *op.cit.*, pp. 62-82.

Cf. Scott, *op.cit.*, p. 34; Parekh, *ibid.*, p. 83ff.

the New Dispensation. I thank God for it. It is a wonder, a marvel."³⁶

Am I an inspired prophet?

For the anniversary lecture of 1875 Keshub chose the theme "Am I an Inspired Prophet?" This was a bold, clear and uncompromising opening of his breast about his position with regard to his country and the Church. At the same time it served as an answer to his strict and demanding. He did not consider himself a prophet or a saint, but made bold to declare that he was a "warrior man" one chosen by Providence for a unique destiny to bring about a union of East and West. The lecture defined the Church which he was destined to establish:

"If I am faithful in devotion, I am a European in practical energy. My creed is not dreamy sentimentalism, not mysticism nor imagination. Energy, yet, energy — I have that in a very great measure in my character and in my Church. . . . My church is a vast European church, full of resolution, heroism, strength and vitality. . . . Like a mighty river, the stream of national devotion comes into my Church from the Vedas and Upanishads, the Persianic books and mytho scriptures of ancient India. None can, none should, resist this torrent, but in my Church warm devotion and practical energy are commingled. The Church, I believe, is destined to bring about the reformation and regeneration of my countrymen. The Lord will that!"

Jacob asks: Who is Christ

This lecture was followed in three months by another, "Jacob Asks: Who is Christ?" In it Keshub was very forthright in denouncing those ideas which had been taking shape in his mind on Christ about whom he had told little scraps (1844-45). It was made clear that that he had many more things to say about Christ for which he needed

36. Quoted in Parekh, *op.cit.*, p 361.

37. Scott, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

38. Delivered on 2-4-1875 - Text in Scott, *ibid.*, pp. 196-213.

further clarification to himself but the time was not then ripe in India. On the same date when the 'India Asks ...' lecture was delivered a note by Keshub in *Mirror of India* said:

The future of India's regeneration must lie through Christ, for he combines in his teachings the spirit of the Rishi which lay in communion, and the spirit of Chaitanya, which lay in the service, loving and devout, of the Lord³⁹.

There was no more any hiding of the fact that Keshub was in passionate love with Christ⁴⁰. In the 'India Asks ...' lecture he declared: "My love for Christ constrains me to speak of him". His loyalty to Jesus was his apology for talking so openly. If it was the moral and ethical aspect of the religion of Christ he emphasized and tried to assimilate into his movement in 1866 and after, it was the purely spiritual and religious aspect which he concentrated upon in 1879. A studied attempt is made to present Christ as an Asiatic and oriental quite at home in the Indian context so that every Indian could and should say Jesus 'is altogether one of us'. Surely Jesus *our* Jesus; not western Christ preached by the missionaries. "He comes to you after all as a Yogi, full of Hindu devotion and communion. In accepting him, therefore, you accept the spirit of a devout Yogi and loving Bhakta, the fulfilment of your national prophets and scriptures." In his 1879 lecture Keshub goes deeper into the question of the Divinity of Jesus though he did not succeed to accept it in the Orthodox Christian meaning of it. He was pre-existent as an Idea, as a pre-determined dispensation yet to be realized. In the words 'I and my Father are one' was the proclamation of his Divine Humanity which means his self-abnegation in a very lofty spiritual sense: Christ had no distinct self of his own, he had eradicated it completely which explains

39. Quoted by Parekh, *op. cit.*, p. 92

40. Observe the way he addresses Christ: "My Christ my sweet Christ, the brightest jewel of my heart, the necklace of my soul - for twenty years I have cherished you in this my miserable heart". Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 217

his asceticism, "his homelessness", and "family-lessness" resulting in his *yoga* or oneness with God⁴¹.

The birth of the church of the New Dispensation

In some way the thinking and life of Keshub had reached great maturity by the beginning of 1880. The open profession of his personal devotion to Christ and his admiration for his religious ideals had reached a peak point, so too his openness to many of the ideals of orthodox Hinduism. It is at such a juncture he inaugurated his new Church, the *Naba Bidan* (Nava Vidhan), the Church of the New Dispensation about which he had made a clear reference in 1875 in the lecture 'Behold the Light of Heaven in India'. He announced its birth almost with a bang in a speech he delivered in Bengali:

The world asks Bengal today, 'Why art thou dressed in new clothes'. Bengal replies, 'Hear, O world, after living for fifty years in the womb of the Brahmo Samaj, where his limbs were being formed, a well-shaped and fully developed child is born after prolonged labour pains. Yoga, meditation, asceticism, devotion, and bhakti have entered into the constitution of this child. The formless Saraswati herself sits on the tongue of this child. . . Jesus, Moses, Chaitanya, Nanak, Kabir, Buddha and Mahomed. . . with their followers, have come to wait upon this child. . . This little child has made room in its heart for three hundred and thirty millions of gods and goddesses of Hindusthan. . . It has assimilated within itself all the Divine incarnations in the world⁴².

This was the new religion, Keshub wanted to give to India, and if possible, to the world. It was the Church through which he wanted to bind together his faithful followers who stood with him in thick and thin, it had thus a limited scope. But the wider scope was much more important for him: it was a new religion drawing from all sides, especially from Hinduism and Christianity what was considered to be the best in them. It was a Church national

41. Cf. Parekh, *op. cit.*, p. 98, 99

42. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 36

and the same time universal, of which Keshub together with the other Brahmos were co-apostles.

The apostles of the New Dispensation

The lecture of the year 1881, "We Apostles of the New Dispensation" delineated the special characteristics of the new Church. Denying any claims to superiority, he called himself and his followers "Hindu apostles" of Christ and "modern Pauls", who were trying to spread the Kingdom of God in India, and thus open a new chapter in Christ's Gospel Dispensation. Emphasis is thus laid on the logical sequence of the dispensations from Moses, Christ and Paul through minor apostles, holy fathers, ministers and missionaries to himself and his brother-apostles.

Behold the beauty of this chain of logical sequence from Adam to Christ, and from Christ down to modern times! How all prophets and reformers, all scriptures and dispensations, are linked together in the unity of a vast synthesis, each growing out of national exigencies in the fulness of time, and all following in the regular order of sequence according to recognised laws of thought⁴³.

The ultimate aim of the Church is to enable its adherents to partake of the Divinity. This spiritual assimilation and absorption into God is perfectly Christian as well as perfectly Hindu. Both need Christ though not necessarily Christianity to attain this purpose. Not only a Christian but a Hindu also should strive to "be Christ", though not Christian. Because in Christ we are reconciled to God and to all truth, and therefore to all dispensations and prophets:

If you have the true Christ in you, all truth, whether Jew or Gentile, Hindu or Christian, will pour into you through him, and you will be able to assimilate the wisdom and righteousness of each sect and denomination. Accept the prince of prophets, and you will find in him and with him all prophets, Eastern and Western⁴⁴.

43. Quoted in Parekh, *op. cit.*, p. 126

44. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 128

Such is the New Dispensation, the harmony of all scriptures and prophets and dispensations; the service which binds and explains and harmonizes all religions. It is "the sweet music of diverse instruments", "the celestial court where around enthroned Divinity shine the lights of all heavenly saints and prophets". In the blessed eucharist let us eat and assimilate all the saints and prophets of the world⁴⁵.

Christ-centred universal church

In 'India Asks, Who is Christ' of 1879 perhaps Keshub unconsciously pronounced his Dispensation to be Christo-centric. In 1881 he did it with full consciousness. In the same year he started a new paper, "The New Dispensation"⁴⁶ which was fully devoted to the elucidation of the ideals and doctrines of his Church.

The last great lecture of Keshub was delivered in the beginning of 1883 on the theme 'Asia's Message to Europe'⁴⁷. Though the title and much of the content of the lecture reveal his growing orientalism, he would insist that his *Nava Vidhan* had united the East and West, Asiatic and European faith and character. In doing so Keshub and his new Church worked faithfully upon the lines laid down by Christ; he only sought to amalgamate the Western and the Eastern Christ. It was the synthesis of the East and the West in harmony and brotherly love. He concludes the lecture with his image of the final consummation of the Church of the New Dispensation: "And as the new song of Atonement is sung with enthusiasm by million voices, representing all the various languages of the world, million souls, each dressed in its national garb of piety and righteousness, glowing in an infinite and complete variety of colors, shall dance round and round the Father's throne and peace and joy shall reign for ever⁴⁸."

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45. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 128f

46. See excerpts in Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 293ff.

47. Scott, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-89

48. *Ibid.*, p. 289

Robert de Nobili: Christianity in the Indian Version

In 1498 Vasco da Gama arrived at Calicut going round the Cape of good hope and thus succeeded in finding a searoute to India while the landroute through the Middle East had been closed for centuries to the West after the advent of Islam. This discovery was almost like a Copernican revolution in Missiology so far as India and the Far East were concerned. After the Pope divided the new world between Portugal and Spain, India and the Far East came under the Patronage of Padroada of Portugal. European missionaries came in large numbers and competed with the Portuguese traders and Conquerors in winning over numerous countries to the Christian fold. Of course Christianity was not unknown to India before the Portuguese came. The Syrian Christians in Kerala were in large numbers and well organised with their clergy. But there was hardly any attempt, on their part, to propagate the Gospel and so India, like all the countries of the Far East, had to look up to the Portuguese to get the message of Salvation.

Portuguese Policy

In 1510 Alphonse de Albuquerque conquered Goa from the Moslems and thereafter it became the capital of Portuguese India as well as the capital of the Portuguese empire in the Far East. Religious policy followed by the Portuguese in India was dictated by what was followed all over Europe in those days. This may be summed up under two heads.

1. *Cujus regio ejus religio* (Lit. whose territory his religion) was the political philosophy of the Reformation

times. It corresponds in some respect to the Sanskrit saying: *Yatha raja tatha praja* (As the ruler so his subjects). But in Europe it meant in practice that the people of a country had to accept and follow the religion followed by the Ruler. When this was not done, persecution followed. The protestant rulers persecuted the Catholics and the Catholics did the same in their kingdom: Queen Elizabeth persecuted the Catholics and Mary did the same with the Protestants. This European environment is to be remembered if we are to understand the policy the Portuguese followed in the territory subject to them in India and in the Far East. What was followed in England, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland etc. was followed by the Portuguese in India.

Catholicism was declared the state religion. No other religion could be practised in public. That did not leave much room for other religious shrines like temples and mosques.

2. *Compelle intrare* (Force them to come for the Marriage-feast) as narrated in Luke 14:15-24 was perhaps the second leading idea in this policy. While by these words strong persuasion is understood today, in those days there were over zealous people who took the words literally and believed that force could be used to get this persuasion. As the Moslems were found traitorous, they were summarily exterminated or exiled. The Hindus got a different treatment. The Portuguese tried to befriend them and win them over to their side. Intermarriage was encouraged. However local religions could not be followed in public. There was no religious toleration as we understand it today.

This was not the case in the new territories termed as *novas conquistas* or newly conquered territories. Here all religions were tolerated and century-old temples may be found there intact. However even here, Christianity enjoyed a privileged position, as it was the state religion.

3. A third factor may also be mentioned. That was what was called *Padroado* or Patronage. By a concordat

with the Pope, the Portuguese king undertook to maintain all churches, chapels, monasteries etc. and pay stipend to all missionaries and ecclesiastics from the royal treasury. In return he enjoyed the following privileges: No bishop could be appointed in India, no missionary could sail there without the permission of the king and then only in a Portuguese ship. Further the king had the right of presentation to all church benefices. Later if we see the Portuguese interfering in the affairs of the Syrian Christians, it is the Padroado and the sweeping powers it gave, that was at the bottom of the Portuguese authorities in India

Thanks to the patronage of the state and the zealous efforts of its missionaries, Christianity was firmly established in the Portuguese territories. The policy followed in the Portuguese protectorates like Cochin, Mylapore, Pearl Fishery Coast was different. It was by persuasion. The fishermen of the Pearl Fishery Coast who were molested by the Moslems, sought the help of the Portuguese. Help was offered if they all became Christians. That offer was accepted: all the Paravas of the Pearl Fishery Coast were baptised in 1532-33. They received a Portuguese sur-Name and a Christian name but no instruction was given to them till St. Francis Xavier came in 1542. The saint translated the prayers into Tamil and instructed them. He appointed catechists in every village to continue this instruction, gather the people for morning and evening prayers and prepare them for confession and communion. This work was so carefully supervised by the companions of St. Francis Xavier that Father Henrique Henriques, who succeeded the saint in the Fishery coast wrote and published several books in Tamil, could assure the superiors in Rome that the Paravas were so well instructed that, even if all the Portuguese leave them, they will never give up their faith. That has remained true right up to our times. Besides the Paravas, the Mucuvass of South Travancore and the Latin Christians of Kerala and South Canara were also converted by the Portuguese. The Portuguese surnames which all these Christians have will testify to their evangelisation by the Portuguese.

All these, Paravas, Mucuvas, Latin Christians, Mangaloreans, East Indians and Goans formed homogeneous and well organised groups, different from their Hindu brethren, not only in religion but also in the social set up. As they were numerous enough to stand on their own, the Hindu society could not ostracise them.

The new Christians gave up all caste and superstitious signs such as the Caste thread, the tuft of hair, the use of sandal wood on the forehead, ceremonial baths before worship etc. Child marriage, *Sathi*, prevention of remarriage of widows, untouchability etc. were suppressed. Further the Portuguese ate beef, drank wine, intermarried and mixed freely with all sections of the people including the untouchables. The new Christians also ate and dressed like the Portuguese. Hence they were called *Culam pukkus*, that is those who had entered a new caste, not merely a new religion. That caste was called *Paranghi* by the Hindus out of contempt. Even the low caste untouchables would not deal with them as they would be ostracised from their own caste. But the Portuguese did not mind it. It did not matter at Goa where the Portuguese were the rulers, nor in the Pearl Fishery Coast where now the Christians formed a large community, but it had a disastrous effect among the Hindus. It made further conversion absolutely impossible, particularly where the Portuguese were not the rulers. The new converts had not only changed their religion but also had become Portuguese by accepting both Portuguese names like Fernando, Dias, Machado, Miranda, Lobo etc. and Portuguese customs and their way of living. This was very much resented by the Hindus and created a barrier between Hinduism and Christianity.

Various attempts were made to break this barrier and prejudice. The effort of the missionaries at Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri in the Moghal Court did not produce any concrete significant result. Nor did the attempt to contact the Vijayanagar court at Chandragiri produce any success. Further Fr Goncalo Fernandez, a Portuguese Jesuit, came

to Madurai in 1595, built a church and a school and looked after the Catholics, mostly traders numbering about two hundred. He was there chiefly to find a way of converting the Hindus. In that he failed. Being a Paranghi he could not get even a hearing either from the ruling Nayak of Madurai or from any of his Brahmin advisers. Further an officer of the Nayak clearly told him that being a Paranghi he should not make any conversions. When the father replied that if he could not give any baptism, he had nothing to do at Madurai. These words were reported to the Nayak, who resented them and sent word to the father that, if he remained in his country only to make Christians, there was no work for him there and that he might as well withdraw in peace to the Coast. This he said because he was convinced that by becoming a Christian one enters into the caste of the Paranghis.

Caste system

Further this religious policy of the Portuguese went directly against the caste system on which the Indian society was strictly based in those days. To make this clear a few words may be said on the system itself. When the Portuguese came to India, they found Indian society divided into various groups, which they called castes. In India castes were called *Jāthi* or *Varṇa*. There are many castes and subdivisions of castes but the traditional division consists of four: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras. Rig Veda considers them to have been descended from the head, shoulders, thighs and feet of Brahma. Brahmins were the scholars and priests, the Kshatriyas were the rulers and soldiers, Vaisyas were the traders and the Sudras were the cultivators. Among these castes there were rules of endogamy, i.e., marriage within the group only, commensality, i.e., food to be received only from the same or a higher group, and craft exclusiveness, i.e., each man following the profession of his group and no other, so that a smith, a carpenter, or a washerman took that profession by heredity not by choice. There was besides untouchability by which a low caste man could not be touched by a high caste man without

pollution. Caste laws were strictly observed so that the man who violated them was ostracised and made an out-caste, which was the worst kind of punishment. Further in the time of de Nobili, Hindu rulers like the Nayak of Madurai, punished those who violated the caste laws by fine and imprisonment.

Brahminical hegemony

There is no need to explain that in such a caste-ridden society the Brahmins enjoyed a privileged position, while the untouchable had little or no rights. Nobili quotes this Sanskrit quotation to explain the position of the Brahmin and the untouchable.

Caṇḍāta darśane sadyaḥ ādityam avalokayet

Caṇḍāla sparśana caiva sacelam snānam ācaret

In case a Brahmin happens to look at an untouchable, let him immediately look at the sun; if he has touched him let him be washed clean along with his clothes. Such was the rule prevalent then. Further Fr. Bucerio, who submits an official report on Nobili in 1610, gives the following: "This Nayak (ruler of Madurai) sends daily to three different places enough foodstuff to feed about a thousand Brahmins; from each of those places the Brahmin cooks bring every day to show to the Nayaka a part of the food they have prepared, but no Brahmin may eat it. The Nayak has seen it; so it is polluted and must be given to the poor.

Fr. Pimenta, Provincial of India, paid a visit to the Nayak in June 1598. Pimenta met the ruler not in his palace but in a quiet suburb, one league away from the city. The ruler was supposed to be recovering from a sickness. But a more obvious reason was the following: Not far from the royal palace in the city, there was an idol called Chockanatha. Pimenta narrates that the idol appeared one night to a priest and said to him: "Go and tell the king that we both cannot stay in this place; either he or I must get out." The king being very superstitious left his palace and went to live in the suburb.

Thus on the one hand the Brahmins had an absolute hold not only over the masses but also on the ruling monarchs

because they were the masters of Hindu religion and culture which permeated every action of the Hindus; on the other the Hindu rulers ruled over the people like despots. There were no constitutions or Parliament to limit their powers, no law-courts to render justice, no fundamental rights to safeguard the individual. Especially the foreign missionary had no *locus standi*. He has no citizenship: any day he may be summarily driven out or refused entry into the country. How is Christianity to breakthrough and gain entrance into such a closed and caste-ridden society? This was the milieu that Robert de Nobili found when he arrived at Madurai on November 15, 1606.

This is how Fr. Albert Laerzio, the Jesuit Provincial Superior of Malabar, reports to Claudius Aquaviva, the Jesuit General on November 20, 1609: "In the month of November 1606 when I went to visit that (Madurai) Residence, I left there Fr. Robert de Nobili with Fr. Gonçalo Fernandes, so that he might learn the language of the court which is purer and more refined (than the one spoken in the Coast) and to see whether he could not find some means of opening a door for the conversion of those gentiles who are remarkable for their ability, judgement and sense of honour.

"While learning the language and informing himself of the customs of the country, he investigated the causes which prevented conversions, and found that the chief one was the poor esteem and low opinion those people had of the Portuguese and of our holy religion. He therefore decided the better to deal with them to conform himself to their notions." This decision of Nobili was not his own. Vico, Nobili's companion, writes to Fr. General in 1610 a report entitled *De Modo* in which he gives a detailed report of Nobili's method. In ch. 2 of that report he points out how this method was drawn up by a group of fathers in Cochin presided by Archbishop Ros of Cranganore. According to that method, 1. the missionary should openly declare that he was not one of the Paranghi caste and that his converts and disciples do not lose their caste or become Paranghis. 2. He should profess: first that he

was a *nobleman* of the highest rank like the Rajus or men of the king's caste, who are ranked immediately after the Brahmins; secondly a *sanyasi* or a religious man who is devoted to a life of all virtues, particularly of chastity and austerity of life and lastly a distinguished *Guru* or wise teacher whose only aim is to lead men to the worship of the true God and to that religion, which alone leads him to salvation and everlasting happiness.

3. Not only should he give up the Portuguese way of life and adopt that of the high castes such as the Brahmins, Rajus but also that special way of life adopted by the Gurus and Sanyasis, who were teachers of penitential life and wear the yellow-white (*kavi*) silk garment of the Sanyasis. Like the Brahmins and Rajus he should engage Brahmin cooks and noble youths for domestic duties. He shall neither visit any house, even that of a noble nor shall he admit any visitors except with great reluctance and that too after repeated requests. Unless custom permitted otherwise, he like the Brahmins and Sanyasis shall not permit any low caste person come near him but must permit men of every rank to prostrate themselves before him. He was also authorised to change certain uncouth terms used in the penny catechism. For the sake of evangelisation he may conduct the church ceremonies with greater solemnity and add even new ones. Further he should have a separate house and church distant from those of Parava christians with whom he should neither mix indiscriminately nor have common worship.

All these directions may seem to go against the direction of Christ who wanted the Gospel preached to the poor. But the situation was completely different in India. The foreign missionary could not meet the poor and down-trodden except through the Rulers and Brahmins, who were the watchdogs of Indian society. They had to be won over before going to the poor. After all Christ himself instructed his disciples: Go ye not into the way of the Gentiles and into the city of Samaritans enter ye not . . . And into what-

soever city or town you shall enter inquire who in it is worthy and there abide till you go thence" Mt 10:5-11. The Samaritans and gentiles were despised by the Jews as Brahmins despised the untouchables, while the worthy man in those days was the high caste man like the Brahmin or Kshatriya. That was accepted in those days by all sections of the Indian society.

Further in his treatise on the *Indian customs*, Nobili has the following in Ch. 11 (149): "As the Brahmins alone in India represent the intelligentia and the teaching profession, from the earliest times it became an established custom for well-nigh every one from the inferior orders, before attempting anything, particularly in matters connected with the sciences and the religious sects, to take counsel on the subject from some learned Brahmins. And it is from this popular attitude that emerges the greatest and most frequently encountered obstacle in the way of conversion of these heathens; so we feel in this our religious community: for almost every one of those to whom we propound the catechetical teaching of Christ immediately goes to consult the Brahmins or brings them along to our house so that, they themselves being conscious of their ignorance in such matters, they may learn what their wise men have to say in rebuttal and this well versed in logic and philosophy as these men are, they at once lead the minds of the enquirers astray by their complicated and abstruse arguments."

The masses had no difficulty at all in following Nobili and accepting the Gospel when they saw that their leaders, the Brahmins accepted him. This must be clearly understood if we want to know why De Nobili took so much trouble to convert the Brahmins and high caste Hindus. It was not because he loved them more than the untouchables. To bring the untouchables themselves he had to go through the Brahmins, who were acknowledged masters in all matters that concern religion and sciences. Without their *placet* the other castes will not accept him.

Nobili's policy of adaptation was dynamic. It went

on changing according to time and place. In the beginning when he was living with Fr. Gonçalo Fernandes, he wore the black cassock like all priests of those days. Even then he abstained from meat, fish, eggs etc and took a purely vegetarian diet. That made him more acceptable to Hindus who came to see him and discuss religion with him. It was then that he converted the schoolmaster and baptised him. Soon several others were converted. The converts themselves suggested that he should change his residence, his dress etc. Nobili referred all this to his superiors in Cochin and built a hut next to the tiled house of Gonçalo Fernandes and took a Brahmin cook to prepare his meals. Even then there was adaptation when he ate on a plantain leaf squatting on the ground. This is how Fr. Leitão, who came to help Nobili at Madurai, describes the first meal he had at Madurai: "His (Nobili's) disciples came to prepare the table which was soon ready, for a plantain leaf spread on the floor served for table, tablecloth, dishes and plates. I sat down near the leaf on which the Brahmin cook served the supper and began to eat: but in spite of my appetite nature felt such a horror for those new preparations, perhaps also for this new system of eating with the fingers, that I had to force myself to swallow some morsels. This disgust lasted for three days."

After the consult in Cochin in October 1607, Nobili got the permission and changed his dress in November. He was still living in the hut next to the Presbytery where Gonçalo lived. This is how his Provincial describes his dress to the General: "The dress of Fr. Robert consists of a long toga of a pale yellow colour like a *cabaya* (gown) which reaches down to his feet. Over it he wears a rochet of fine linen of the same colour; and over the rochet he throws over his shoulders a cloth either red or of the same colour as the gown. On the head he wears a cloth of fine linen, like a round biretta, while from his neck hangs a cord made of five threads, three of gold, and two of white linen with a cross which falls on his breast." Nobili explained that the three golden threads signified the Blessed Trinity, the two white threads the Body and soul of Christ.

and the cross, symbol of redemption so that the thread, which to the common people represented the caste sign, signified to the faithful the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption.

Later in January 1610, that is after three years, Nobili removed this thread from his shoulders as further study of the Hindu law taught him that the Saivite Sanyasis removed the thread when they became Sanyasis and renounced the world. However it was never removed from his staff to which it was attached, as was the case with the Saivaite Brahmin Sanyasis. We have several treatises by Nobili who defends the thread as a caste sign, which can be worn by his christians even after they had received Baptism.

Regarding his dress we have a better description from Cinnami, who describes it thus: "Here I dressed like Fr. Martins (companion of Nobili)." "Here I dressed like Fr. Martins, i.e., I put on a long garment, which reached down to the feet, and tied my loins with a cloth, but without any knot, and threw a kind of cape on my shoulders, and a turban on my head. No boots, but barefooted, no shirt and no cloak. A stick in the right hand, with a flag on top - a sign of poverty; in the left a round vessel called *camondola*. I bored my ears, covered head and neck with ashes. This is the dress of the Sanyasi" Cinnami says in another place: "Our dress consists of four pieces of cloth, dyed with *bolo armenico*, a colour much esteemed in these lands for it is preferred by men given to penance and austerity. The same cloths serve as shirt and habit, as a mantle in the rain, and our blanket at night; and whether it be hot or cold, it is ever the same. Our servant and companion is a tiger's or a goat's skin. It serves as pulpit to preach the truths of our holy faith; as confessional to hear the penitent's confessions; as chair to discuss and dispute with the teachers of Idolatry; as a bed to rest and sleep upon." These two reports give us a clear idea of the dress he wore.

Nobili was a *Rajarithi* or a penitent Curu belonging

to the Raja caste. He could say this without any scruple as he was born a noble and the count of Civitellax, and as the nobility more or less corresponded to the Kshatriya caste. He himself says this in his Manifesto of 1610, "I came from Rome; my family in Rome corresponds to that of good Rajahs in this land". But later when he found that only Brahmins could teach the Brahmins, who alone were considered masters of religion and sciences, he became a Brahmin Sanyasi. This he defends against Buccerio and others who attacked him for equivocation. According to him, Brahmin means a doctor and so any one who is a doctor in the west can call himself a Brahmin in India just as a barber or a carpenter can call himself a barber or a carpenter in India without the odious distinction: 'I am indeed a barber by profession not by birth as in India'. He reminds his opponents that those among them who were called Levites were not descended from Levi, which was its original meaning; still they are called so because of the function, not of birth. Moreover, Brahmins in the time of Nobili seemed to have held the statement behind the sloka.

Janmanā jāyate Śudrah, karmaṇa jayate dvijah

By birth a man is born a sudra; it is by *Upanayana* ceremony that he becomes the twice-born or high caste man. That explains why Nobili wore the thread. Further he who knows the law was called a Brahmin. Nobili proves that Veda or Law was of various kinds, Dhanus Veda (military science), Ayur Veda (Medical science), Gandharva Veda (Science of Music), and finally Vedantam, For all these cases Veda is used in the sense of science in general, not in the traditional sense of vedas. Several Brahmins in Madurai tried to probe him on this point but gave up all attempt to refute Nobili. Even his Provincial Pero Francisco who unlike his predecessor was against Nobili's method, had no objection to the fathers calling themselves Brahmins after he heard the arguments proposed by them.

To open the door, (aperire portam)

But this status of a Brahmin Sanyasi demanded very great sacrifices. It meant in addition to his religious vows

of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, an absolute abstinence from meat, fish, eggs, wine etc. It meant daily fast and only one meal at 4 PM. It meant giving up chairs, cots, shoes, hat, travelling on horseback etc. It meant even cutting off from his own brethren with regard to food, as Nobili took a Brahmin cook with him whether he went to Cochin to see his Provincial or to the Council of Goa. It was a *kenosis*, a complete emptying of all nationality, culture and personal convenience. It was a question of the grain of wheat dying in order to bring forth much fruit.

Fr, Sauliere says, "The methods he followed and the means he used may be discussed and found impracticable for us either because pygmies cannot use the tools of giants or because the circumstances in which we live are so different. Nor did he attach to them a permanent value; he modified them as he went along, now wearing the thread, now discarding it, now living as a recluse, now as an itinerant preacher. These were means, tools which he used or left alone according as they did or did not serve his purpose. But from his resolve to enthrone Christ in the heart of India he never swerved. He brought to that task all his genius, all his heart."

His one ambition, one idea, one motto was to open the door of India to the Gospel. At that time it was thought impossible to convert any Hindu as they despised the Portuguese and the 'Paranghi Markam' which they followed. Still among them, Robert de Nobili opened the way to the Gospel. *Aperire portam, aperire aditum ad has gentes* (To open the door, to open the way for these nations) occurs constantly in his letters. Nobili came to Madurai on November 15, 1606. On March 17 of the same year, that is exactly four months after, he baptised his first convert Albert, the school master well versed in Saiva Siddhanta philosophy as can be seen from the discussion he had with Nobili. Thereafter others followed, so many in number that Nobili asked for a helper. The baptisms administered may not be thousands, but the method he followed brought thousands. His companion Balthasar da Costa writing in 1661 (five years after the death of Nobili)

attributes all the 30,000 baptisms to him when he says, *Triginta fere millia animarum, quae in hac missione sacro fonte ablutae sunt, Roberti laboribus debentur*: about 30,000 souls who were baptised in this Mission, are due to Robert's labours. By this he means the method formulated by Nobili and followed by his successors. The number rose to 75,000 in 1688, to 90,000 in 1705 and over two lakhs in 1760. The enormous sacrifices Nobili made and the numerous writings he undertook to stabilise the mission were not in vain. The great ideal Nobili set before him, namely, to open the door for the Gospel was more than realised. The door opened by Nobili has remained open right up today. Freedom of religion and the right to practise and propagate it is enshrined among the fundamental rights of the Constitution of India.

Adaptation and inculturation

Adaptation to one's environment is something clear in itself. The same is the teaching of Scripture which speaks of the condescension of God who became man in order to save man. It is also clear from the teaching and example of St. Paul who became all things to all men. However adaptation becomes indispensable when the Gospel is preached in places where the social customs are entirely different. Newman gives an instance in his *Loss and Gain* (1831 p. 276): "The Greeks cut their hair in grief, the Romans let it grow; the Orientals veiled their heads in worship, the Greeks uncovered them; Christians take off their hats in a church. Mahometans their shoes; a long veil is a sign of modesty in Europe, of immorality in Asia."

Nobili understood this very well. In this case adaptation meant complete change when he adopted the food dress and manner of living of the Brahmin Sanyasis, even though it meant daily fasting for about fifty years and only one vegetarian meal a day. This adaptation did not stop with food and dress only.

Nobili built his church in Indian style. That was criticised by his opponents. Thanks to this criticism, we know something about the church. In a letter to the Jesuit General

Fr. Gonçalo, Nobili's opponent, writes thus: "The father built his church in the form, herewith included, which they call *Madam*. When digging the foundations they had recourse to the customary ceremonies in their edifices, namely breaking coconuts to the gods of the foundations, offering them at the same time plantains and other things on which the foundations and the first stone are placed." This is a typical instance of Gonçalo's misrepresenting innocent Indian local customs. Unfortunately the map of the church he sent Rome has not come to us. However we have an official description by Bucciario in 1610: "The church is made of bricks and consists of three naves separated by rows of columns in black granite, with cross beams of the same material...the church had one main door and on both sides two windows with iron bars. The portico is covered by a terrace, because here timber is very expensive. The women keep to one of the three naves and are separated from the rest by a curtain so as not to be seen by men. The father did not build his church in the same style as the one we have here (Madurai) or those on the Coast but with a terrace, and this, not only because timber is expensive but chiefly to adapt himself to the custom of the country."

Pero Francisco, the Provincial of Malabar after Lerzio, was against Nobili's indianising policy. Here we give some of his 34 orders to Nobili. Order 20: Over the church must be put a wooden or stone cross so that it may be understood and known to all that it is a church and house of God, *for the external form of the present church is that of a pagoda*. Order 18: When the priest preaches or gives a homily to Christians in the church let him sit on a chair or use some kind of pulpit instead of sitting on the ground as it was done till now (Nobili had no chair in his house. Apparently he sat on the raised platform over a tiger's skin just below the altar). Order 13: The blessing and distribution of sandal to Christians which is done in the church before Mass must be given up nor is the opening and closing of certain curtains during certain parts of the Mass permitted (All this was allowed by the

Archbishop of Cranganore who was Nobili's ordinary. Regarding the curtains Buccerio says: In the sanctuary there is a curtain of fine white *vacha* (?) which is drawn when he prepares the chalice and purifies it. *Order* 22-24: As the cross was considered the insignia and badge of the Paranghis, Nobili had the cross only in the sanctuary; crosses were removed from rosary beads of the Christians in order not to scandalise the Hindus. They were given crystal beads. Both these customs are condemned. *Order* 32-33: Nobili translated the names of the sacraments etc. into Tamil. The same he did for the names of saints given to the faithful at Baptism. Baptism was translated *Gnāna Snānam*, Fides - *Visuvasam*, Peter - *Malaiappan*, Lazarus - *Devasahayam* etc. This custom is condemned and forbidden. All these restrictions give an idea of the hostile environment in which Nobili worked.

Nobili adapted himself to the Indian environment in his food, clothing, habitation and other things. But these are only externals. More important was his intellectual and cultural adaptation. We shall give here one or two instances to illustrate that point.

1. *Christianity presented as the fourth Veda*: In Nobili's time people believed that they had lost the fourth Veda, though they had the three others. The fourth was the spiritual law, which alone ensured their salvation. Nobili made use of this situation and told them: I came from a distant country only to teach them that law of salvation which according to the Brahmins had been lost. Thus I adapt myself to them in the same way as St. Paul to the Athenians regarding the Unknown God. I tell them that if they wish to recover and learn that law, they ought to become my disciples.

2. Nobili mentions in a letter he wrote to his Provincial that there were 10,000 (*diecimila*) Brahmin students at Madurai divided among different masters, one having 200, another 300 etc. The king had endowed many colleges in Madurai to support the students and their professors. Nobili wanted to open a school of Christian philosophy in order to teach them the

doctrine of salvation. He picked up enough Sanskrit to give the lectures in that language, but the scheme fell through as his Provincial could not find an endowment to support the professors and students.

3. Nobili found that though to an outsider Hinduism looked monolithic, there were numerous schools among them, Buddhists, Jains, Saivites, Vishnavites, nastikas and others. All these observed the Indian social customs but held different religious beliefs. It was the ambition of Nobili to be like them in externals and teach Christianity as one of the schools.

4. One of the greatest services of Nobili for inculturation was the learning of the Indian languages. He has left us writings in six languages, Italian (his mother tongue — chiefly letters), Portuguese (the official language of the Province — all official documents are in it), Latin (Official language of the Church — Mass, Sacraments, and all his learned treatises are written in Latin), Tamil (the language of the people — numerous treatises of Nobili are in Tamil; he is also the father of Tamil prose), Telugu (the language of the ruling Nayaks of Madurai — several books were written by him, including the Penny Catechism which is still in use), and Sanskrit (the language of the Brahmins — Nobili was fluent and discussed with the Brahmins in this language). His fluency in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit made him most acceptable to the Indian people.

5. Nobili coined the terms in Tamil for Christian Theology. He could express the most difficult ideas in Tamil without any difficulty. Tamil simply charmed him. Writing to his aunt he tells her that he was busy with the study of Tamil, which he found *bellissima, copiosissima e molto elegante*. It is not merely the language which spoke but the man who ardently loved the people and was ready to sacrifice anything for them.

6. Finally Nobili wrote *ex professo* several treatises like *Apologia*, *Indian Customs*, *Answer to Bucerio* and, the *Narratio* for the Goa conference of 1619. He was a master theologian who had a firm grip of Christianity, its belief,

practice and history. He could easily distinguish what was essential in Christianity as opposed to accidentals found in it and suggest meaningful adaptation according to local conditions.

7. His great desire to have a seminary for the formation of the Indian clergy could not be realised for want of funds. That did not prevent him from writing books on theology and philosophy.

8. Another desire of his was to get Sanskrit used for the liturgy instead of Latin. In this effort he was ahead of the times. That was to take place only after the second Vatican Council, when his teaching on adaptation was better appreciated.

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Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the Indian masses were awakening to a national consciousness that had as its primary aim the freedom of India from foreign domination. Radical nationalism was emerging all over this great land and it took momentum from the first war of independence. It seemed that this great nation had gone to sleep under the yoke of foreign rule, but now, the sleeping giant was re-awakened by the call to found the Swaraj. It was in this awakening civilisation that Bhawani Charan Banerjee or, as he was called later, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya was born in 1861 into a Bengali brahmin family. During his years in the High School, he became a radical nationalist with extreme radical views. He planned to join the army of Gwalior with the aim of fighting the British. The Congress Movement was far too moderate for his taste. When his attempts to join the army failed, he gave up his military ambitions and became a teacher instead.

Around 1880 he met Vivekananda, who was of the same age, and they became close friends. They joined the Brahma Samaj under K.C. Sen. Already as a child, Brahmabandhav encountered Christianity through his uncle Kali Charan Banerjee, the founder of the Christo Samaj and one of the earliest and greatest Christian nationalists of Bengal. The interest in the teachings and life of Christ that was awakened in Brahmabandhav by his uncle was further increased by Sen's influence. He gradually embraced Christianity and was baptised in the Anglican Church, in 1891, declaring immediately afterwards that he did not intend to have any denominational Church affiliation. His ideal, like that of his uncle, was an Indian Christian

Church, and in some articles he claimed that it had been Keshub Chunder Sen's intention to create such a Church. Later in the same year he joined the Catholic Church, and took the name Brahmabandhav (Theophilus — friend of God), to which was later added Upadhyaya (teacher). In 1894, he took off his Western clothes and put on the saffron robe of a Sannyasin, announcing that he would live as a sannyasi and work for the spread of the Christian gospel.

Even before his open profession of Christianity he was interested in the possibility of reconciling 'pure Hinduism and pure Christianity'.

To preach Christ as the eternal Son of God, as the Logos in all prophets and saints before and after his Incarnation, and as the incarnate perfect Righteousness by whose obedience man is made righteous¹.

The theological approach of Brahmabandhav was motivated by his concern for an indigenous expression of Christian faith and life. It finds expression in his efforts for:

- a) an integration of the Social structure of India into Christian way of life;
- b) the establishment of an Indian Christian monastic order;
- c) the employment of Vedanta for the expression of Christian theology; and
- d) the recognition of the Vedas as the Indian Old Testament.

Contribution towards a Vedic-Christian Theology

In the years immediately after his conversion Brahmabandhav concentrated his efforts on finding common ground for Hinduism and Christianity from which to evolve a truly Indian Christian theology in order to make Christianity acceptable to India in Indian categories of thought and expression. In the early stages of this effort he tried to find natural foundations for the supernatural religion of Christ in the religion of the Vedas. He pointed to parallels between the Old Testament and the Vedas in the teaching on the origin of man, in the original sinless existence of

1. B. Animananda, *The Blade; Life and Work of Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya*, (Calcutta, n. d.).

man and the later corruption of man. Quoting extensively from the Vedas he tried to prove his main argument that ancient Hinduism had been a pure theistic faith before it was corrupted by polytheism, idolatry and pantheism. "The more we study the ancient literature of India, the more we are convinced of the primitiveness of Theism... Amidst the darkened aberrations of the Indian intellect, irrepressibly flashes out the sublime idea of the one true God."² He was convinced that the understanding of God found in the Vedas was the highest possible at a philosophical level and that no where else in the world had philosophy soared so high with the possible exception of ancient Greece. But in course of time India fell from these heights and Brahmabandhav pointed to the doctrines of re-incarnation and transmigration and the Advaita philosophy as reasons for this fall. This antagonism towards the Advaita Philosophy brought him into direct conflict with the Hindu renaissance movements of his time. He was convinced that, if he could lead Hinduism back to its original form, he could pave the way for the Christian faith.

Brahmabandhav described the Christian mission as a threefold task: to eradicate the erroneous and mischievous doctrines, to lay the basis of Theism by the help of the Vedas and to build Christianity on that foundation. He called on every Christian missionary to find out the truth in Hinduism and to "baptise the truths of Hindu Philosophy and build them up as stepping stones to the Catholic faith." Brahmabandhav based his theology on the Thomistic natural-supernatural framework and is probably the first one to apply this precisely to the relation between Hinduism and Christianity.

It is on account of the close connection between the natural and the supernatural that we have taken upon ourselves the task of expounding the Hindu Scriptures systematically and of fishing out the Theistic truths... and to form, as it were, a natural platform upon which

the Hindus taking their stand may have a view of the glorious, supernatural edifice of the Catholic religion of Christ³. (*Sophia*, Jan. 1895, 6f.)

Like early christianity which built a foundation for its faith in Greek philosophy, so too, Brahmabandhav wanted to build a "Hindu foundation for the supernatural Christian religion." He sought to project Christianity as the fulfilment of Hinduism, for "the primitive (Hinduism) and the new (Christianity) are linked together as root and trunk, base and structure, as outline and filling"⁴. But the effort to build this common ground on Theism did not reach far since the Vedas contain theistic ideas only in fragments. Moreover, his earlier denouncement of Vedanta Philosophy was based on Western interpretations that did not give an adequately correct interpretation to that philosophy and was therefore misleading.

Realising the futility of searching for a Hindu foundation for Christianity in the religion of the Vedas, Brahmabandhav gradually began to look to the much more comprehensive Vedanta-Philosophy as a possible foundation for an Indian Christian theology. It is evident that "he did not give up the view that the Vedas represented Indian monotheism parallel to the Old Testament and able to be connected with the Old Testament and help India come to the New"⁵. It would therefore be quite correct to assume that Brahmabandhav did not consider any philosophy as exhaustive enough to give expression to the Christian faith. His writings show that he was prepared to draw from various schools of Indian thought-systems those insights that were complimentary to each other while rejecting what in those systems were incompatible with the Christian faith.

A Hindu foundation for the Christian Faith

Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya did not consider all religions as equal but believed that in Christ and in him alone all

3. Ibid., p. 35.

4. Ibid., p. 36.

5. M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance*, (Madras, 1970), p. 104.

religions must find their fulfilment. But Christianity came to India as a Western religion, in terms, structures and categories alien to it. Brahmabandhav considered these western forms neither as the only possible ones nor as the final form for Christianity. He wrote:

The development of the Christian religion has not come to an end. It will grow, blossom and fructify till the end of time. Indian soil is humid and its humidity will make the ever-new Christian Revelation put forth newer harmonies and newer beauties, revealing more clearly the invisible integrity of the Universal Faith deposited in the Church by the Apostles of Jesus Christ. The Hindu mind and heart, coming under the dominion of the One, Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church, will sing a new canticle which will fill the earth with sweetness from end to end⁶.

The integrity of the deposit of faith is not to be tampered with while the Western elaborations of this faith which is misleading the Indian must be replaced by an Indian thought-system.

The Hindu mind is extremely subtle and penetrative, but is opposed to the Greco-Scholastic method of thinking. We must fall back on the Vedantic method, in formulating the Catholic religion to our countrymen. In fact, the Vedanta must be made to do the same service to the Catholic faith in India as was done by the Greek philosophy in Europe⁷.

Brahmabandhav is conscious of the history of the development of Christian doctrine. From its birth into the Semitic culture of Palestine to its acceptance of Greek Philosophical systems as a foundation and the subsequent establishment of a homogeneity between the faith and the Greco-Roman and later the Franco-German cultures, there lies a long story of the faith taking on different forms of expression while the integrity of faith itself was

6. Kaj Baago, op.cit., pp. 131f

7. Robin Boyd, *Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (Madras, 1975), p. 68

maintained. Even in embracing Greek philosophy as a philosophical foundation for the Christian faith, early Christianity used only platonic and neo-platonic categories and considered Aristotelian philosophy as an enemy of Christianity until St. Thomas Aquinas made it the rational basis of Christian theology. The christianity that Brahmabandhav encountered in India was a religion that had identified itself with western culture and had still been seeking to retain that homogeneity between culture and religion. Brahmabandhav saw this foreign clothing in which Christianity was attired as the chief reason preventing the Indian from perceiving the Universal nature of the catholic faith. He believed that this universal faith will always remain foreign and unacceptable to India as long as it refused to accept Indian categories of thought just because the Indian philosophical systems contained certain errors. "The assimilation of the Vedantic Philosophy by the Church should not be opposed on the ground of its containing certain errors. Were not Plato and Aristotle also guilty of monumental errors?" (*Sophia*, August 1898) Brahmabandhav expressed himself so enthusiastically regarding the possibilities of using the Vedanta philosophy as a basis for a Christian theology that he found this to be the answer not only for India but for the whole world.

Brahmabandhav believed that Christianity had come into contact with a new philosophy in India after centuries of association with Greek philosophy and that this new philosophy it encountered "still unquestionably soars higher than her western sister", inspite of the fact that it may contain errors. He pleaded for Christianity to look upon Hindu Philosophy as St. Thomas looked upon Aristotelian Philosophy and called for attempts to be made to win over Hindu Philosophy to the service of Christianity as Greek Philosophy was won over in the middle ages. He wrote:

We have no definite idea as regards the *Modus operandi* of making Hindu Philosophy the handmaid of Christianity. The task is difficult and beset with many dangers. But we have a conviction and it is growing day by day that the Catholic Church will find

it hard to conquer India unless she makes Hindu Philosophy new wood and draw water for her. The more we meditate on the cogitations of Hindu Philosophy concerning the Supreme Being, or its marvellous but fruitless effort to penetrate into His inner nature... the more light is thrown upon the ever-mysterious Christian doctrine of the one God, one yet multiple, absolute yet related within Himself, discovering in it a new fitness to appease the noblest cravings of man and satisfy the demands of the loftiest intellect⁸.

Brahmabandhav shows how Vedanta Philosophy can be used to make various Christian doctrines intelligible to the Indian, without destroying the integrity of the faith. His rendering of the doctrine on the Trinity in poetry is now an accepted and famous contribution:

I bow to Him who is Being, consciousness and Bliss,
I bow to Him whom worldly minds loathe, whom
pure minds
yearn for, the Supreme Abode.

He is Supreme, the Ancient of days, the transcendent,
Indivisible, transcendent and immanent,
One having triple relationship, holy, unrelated,
Self-conscious, hard to realise.

The Father, the Highest Lord, Unbegotten, the rootless
principle of the Tree of Existence, the cause of the
Universe,

One who creates intelligently, the Preserver of the World.

The uncreated, infinite Logos or Word, supremely
great, the image of the Father, one whose form is In-
telligence, the Giver of the highest freedom.

One who proceeds from the union of Sat and Chit,
the blessed Spirit, intense Bliss, the Sanctifier, One
whose movements are Swift, one who speaks about
the Word, the Life-Giver (*Sophia*, Oct. 1894)⁹.

8. M.K. Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials*, (Serampore, 1932), p. 68

9. Kaj Baago, op.clt., p.40

Though Hindu terminology is used to describe the mystery of the Trinity, the Christian orthodoxy of this magnificent hymn stands out. Much of the vocabulary has biblical echoes. The Vedanta terminology is as expressive or even more vivid than the Greek or Latin-derived words which might have been used instead. As Robin Boyd points out: "What the Bible says about the Triune God, and what the Church teaches, can be felt behind this hymn whose atmosphere is yet so very Indian"¹⁰. The conception of Saccidananda cannot exhaustively define the nature of the Trinity. But when imaginatively used as here, especially with Brahmabandhav's rich combination of ideas from Scriptural, Greek and Hindu sources, it seems definitely to provide for the Hindu a "stepping-stone" towards the full understanding of the Christian doctrine. Upadhyaya finds it possible to combine the Thomist idea of God as pure Being with Vedantic conception of Brahman from "we hold with the Vedantists that there is one eternal Essence from which proceed all things". This pure Being may be identified with Brahman:

"Brahman is Being itself. He alone is identical with His own Being while creatures have no right of being, but have a merely participated and dependent existence"¹¹.

Brahmabandhav tried to show systematically how the Vedanta Philosophy could become the foundation for an Indian Christian theology and also how the two were opposed to each other on certain points of doctrine. He claimed his objective to be: "to present to our countrymen the right and full Christianity — a Christianity which fulfils all the accumulated goodness of our ancient country; which when adhered to and acted upon, will conserve and develop the peculiar virtues and characteristics of the Hindu race; which is suited, as we firmly believe, to all ages and all climes; which, in short, is catholic"¹². Brahmabandhav never ceased believing that Christianity fulfilled

10. Robin Boyd, *op.cit.*, p 71

11. *Ibid.*, p.71

12. Antony Mookenthottam, *Indian Theological Tendencies* (Berne 1978), p.36

all religious yearning of mankind and that this truth will be acceptable to Hinduism if expressed through Indian thought systems. He was however not unaware of the limitations of Vedantic Philosophy in its application to Christian faith. But he believed that Vedanta held sufficient common ground with Christianity and that in fact, Vedanta was closer to Christianity than Greek Philosophy. In affirming his faith in a Trinitarian God, Brahmabandhav does not try just to show parallels between Christianity and Vedanta. He had come to know God in Christ and his own experience of God being the personal experience of a triune God, he found that the Vedantic teaching on God as Sat, Chit and Ananda can give an adequate expression to this faith. In the understanding of God as triune through the concept of Saccidananda, Vedantic teaching is fulfilled in a more meaningful way than even in Sankara. Hence, for the benefit of his countrymen Brahmabandhav is led to explain the mystery of the God-head, the real meaning of Brahman, in terms of the Trinitarian Saccidananda. This mystery can only be known through Revelation. Sankara had understood something of the Trinity-in-Unity, but the true meaning of Saccidananda is given only in the Christian revelation.

Brahmabandhav tried to explain also other doctrines central to the Christian faith using Vedanta terminology and thought patterns which we cannot discuss here.

Hindu and Christian at the same time

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Indian masses were already caught up in the struggle for independence. Brahmabandhav was deeply concerned about the tendency of Christianity to distance itself from this national struggle. He failed to understand how the Indian Christians could remain aloof from the struggle to free their motherland from foreign domination. It was, as an Indian, as one deeply entrenched in the cultural and religious life of India, that he had believed in Christ and embraced the catholic faith. This in no way alienated him from the national aspiration for freedom and the restoration

of the integrity of India. And as radical nationalism spread in Bengal, Brahmabandhav was deeply affected by this movement. Involvement in this movement was not a choice against the Christian faith, nor was it a choice to compromise his faith. Brahmabandhav could not see how a Christian could stand unconcerned when the whole nation was on the move for freedom. The Christian faith itself had its foundations in the history of Israel's struggle for freedom and deliverance from slavery. The God of the Bible was a God who continuously sided with the poor and the oppressed against the powerful and the oppressor. Faith in the Christian God necessarily should lead to an active participation in the national struggle for deliverance from foreign rule. Brahmabandhav chose to merge his energies with the freedom struggle not against but because of his faith in the Christian religion. The unconcerned attitude of most Christians at this very critical stage in the history of the nation made Brahmabandhav attack the westernised Christianity in India, since, for him, such forms of Christianity were not only unacceptable to the Indian but also because they were seen as destroying the rich religious and cultural heritage of India.

With the spread of British rule and culture, India lost her own idea of civilisation. Our educated classes think as they have been taught by their foreign masters. Our minds have been conquered. We have become slaves. The faith in our own culture and the love for things Indian are gone. India will reach Swaraj the day she will again have a faith in herself. . . The whole mass of our people must be made to appreciate things Indian and to return to our ancient way. This is Swadesh¹³.

He expressed his pain at the enslavement of India by outsiders. What he shared with his countrymen was the commitment towards the emancipation of India. "What we want is that India may be free, that the stranger may be driven from our homes, that the continuity of the learning, the civilisation and the system of the rishis may be

13. M K Kuriakose, *op.cit.*, pp.268f

preserved."¹⁴ He echoes the Biblical experiences of deliverance from slavery in the history of Israel when he spoke of the hour of deliverance for India:

Our power is more than human. It is divine. We have heard the voice telling us that the period of India's suffering is about to close, that the day of her deliverance is close at hand. It is because we have heard the voice that we have left our forest-home and come to town. We have heard the voice and we cannot fail to see the chains of India removed before we die¹⁵.

The lack of positive support from Christianity for the struggle for independence was a grave set back for the faith in India. Brahmabandhav saw this as resulting from the existence of Christianity in western clothing. Indian christians seemed to be denationalised and isolated not only from the Hindu religion but also from Indian culture. Brahmabandhav gave vent to this alienation very forcefully.

Protestantism has created a deep rooted impression amongst the people that Christianity is synonymous with denationalisation. People have a strong aversion against Christian preachers because they are considered to be destroyers of everything national. Therefore, the itinerent missionaries should be thoroughly Hindu in their mode of living¹⁶.

The impression was gaining ground that Christianity was an arm of the colonisers of this country. Christianity had become identified with European civilisation and India was not prepared to accept the Culture of the coloniser along with his religion. Brahmabandhav was harshly judged for his stand for an indigenous thelogy and an Indian church both of which could be identified as Indian and could share the hopes and aspirations of India. He was accused of having chosen false patriotism against the

14. Ibid., p 269.

15. Ibid., pp. 264f

16. A.M. Mundadan, "Emergence of Catholic Theological Consciousness in India" (Star, 1985) p.21

Christian faith by A. Vath, a German Catholic theologian. In his study of Brahmabandhav Vath states:

He now faced the alternative 'Christian faith or false Patriotism' and he chose the latter. The racial and cultural pride beset him completely, western culture became his chief enemy, and increasingly he now turned to the Indian religion as the main treasure of Indian culture. The Hindu nationalist conquered the Christian nationalist¹⁷.

This unjustifiable criticism against Upadhyaya has its roots in the mind of the coloniser who believed in the supremacy of his culture and tradition and hence could never accept that another culture could be equal, let alone be more enriching than his own culture. But Brahmabandhav believed that India could never be converted to Christianity as long as it was the religion of the coloniser. For him, the independence of India was a necessary condition to be fulfilled before the message of the Gospel could be preached with any tangible result. He was convinced that 'before India could become Catholic, she must be politically free and that otherwise it would be impossible to extirpate the bane of Europeanism which is so disastrously rampant in all the missions of the period'¹⁸. Brahmabandhav was one of the few Indians of that period who saw the justification for the movement for freedom and he had the courage to give his total support to it. He was a born nationalist. His early attempts to join the army of Gwalior to fight the British speak for his sympathy with radical nationalism. He was one of the first Indians to stand for the complete independence of the motherland and to suffer for it. He also saw how necessary it was for the Indian Church in that hour of trial to acknowledge India's cultural and religious heritage and try to unite it with the Christian faith.

In that direction, Brahmabandhav called himself a Hindu again. In *Sophia*, July 1898, he wrote: "By birth we

17. Kaj Baago, op.cit., p.36

18. A.M. Mundadan, op.cit., p.22

are Hindus and shall remain Hindu till death. But as *dvija* (twice-born) by virtue of our sacramental rebirth, we are Catholics, we are members of the indefectible communion embracing all ages and climes." He distinguished his catholic faith from cultural and social life. The faith was universal, embracing all cultures, philosophies and forms of societal order and fulfilling all of them. He did not see, therefore, any contradiction in calling himself a Hindu. Christianity had already found expression in so many different cultures and traditions. Hence there was no possible reason why it could not find an authentically Indian expression, but rather, with the rich cultural, religious and philosophical heritage in India, Christianity could blossom into new heights if it found a meeting point with the Indian reality. Brahmabandhav sincerely believed that he could remain a Hindu and be an authentic Christian!

In customs and manners, in observing caste and social distinction, in eating and drinking, in our life and living we are genuine Hindus, but in our faith we are neither Hindu nor European, nor American, nor Chinese, but all-inclusive. Our faith fills the whole world and is not confined to any country or race, our faith is universal and consequently includes all truths (*Sophia*, July 1897).

And yet Brahmabandhav, like others who joined the Christian faith had embraced Western culture along with the faith. It was only later that he gave up Western dress and customs, only later did he realise that his faith in Christ did not demand giving up his original cultural heritage. He was also to realise that giving up the Indian heritage for the cultural heritage of the coloniser in fact harmed the cause of the faith in India. It seems to have been this faith that made Brahmabandhav retrace his steps and call himself a Hindu once again. It was not merely a symbolic gesture. He delved once more into the riches of his heritage and found reason to be proud of that tradition:

We are proud of the stability of the Hindu race. Many mighty races did rise and fall, but we continue to exist,

though we had to buffet many a religious deluge and weather many a political storm. We believe in the future greatness of our race and in this belief we shall live and die (*Sophia*, July 1897).

Brahmabandhav found a new freedom in calling himself a Hindu once again. He had overcome the alienation from his roots which he had experienced when he embraced western culture. Once he had given up the foreign culture he experienced the freedom of being Indian, of being one with his people, of being re-united to his roots. In that process he did not loose his Catholic faith. He experienced the truth that his Catholic faith, in fact, helped him to become a better Hindu:

The more strictly we practice our universal faith, the better do we grow as Hindus. All that is best and noblest in the Hindu character is developed in us by the genial inspiration of the perfect *Narahari* (God-man) our pattern and guide. The more we love Him, the more we love our country, the prouder we become of our past glory (*Sophia*, July, 1897).

This was totally unacceptable to the western mind, steeped as it was in the necessary homogeneity between culture and religion. The accusation from Vath that Brahmabandhav had chosen false patriotism instead of the Christian faith is therefore understandable, since a western theologian could not have understood the subtle difference Brahmabandhav made between religion and culture. The christian faith in Europe was so totally identified with the European culture that some of the Western theologians, and one of the notable among them, Hilaire Belloc, declared toward's the end of the last century that "Europe is the faith, and the faith is Europe". Such a stand in favour of a particular culture could never have been acceptable among the people of India who can boast of a civilisation that pre-dates that of Europe and are proud of their cultural heritage. Europe could not make a distinction between religion and culture, such as Brahmabandhav did though in a very subtle manner:

Do we really believe in Hinduism? The question must be understood before it can be answered. Hinduism

has no definite creed. Kapila and Vyasa were opposed to each other and yet both of them are considered to be rishis. The Hindu Vedantists of the school of Ramanuja look down upon the Hindu Vedantists of the school of Sankara as blasphemers; the Vaishnava doctrine differs as widely as the poles from the Siva doctrine; even the gods have been made to fight one another in the Puranas. The test of being a Hindu cannot therefore be in religious opinions.

Brahmabandhav made this distinction clearer:

Yet, we have drunk of the spirit of Hinduism. We think with the Vedantists that there is an eternal Essence from which proceed all things. We believe with the Vaishnavas in the necessity of incarnation and in the doctrine that man cannot be saved without grace. We agree in spirit with Hindu law-givers in regard to their teaching that Sacramental rites are vehicles of sanctification. With wondering reverence do we look upon their idea of establishing a sacred hierarchy vested with the highest authority in religious and social matters. In short we are Hindus as far as our physical and mental constitution is concerned, but in regard to our immortal souls we are Catholic. We are Hindu Catholics (*Sophia*, July, 1897).

In his view of relationship of Hindu culture to Hindu religion, Brahmabandhav was convinced of the possibility of being a Hindu and a Christian at the same time; a conviction he arrived at by separating the religious from the cultural Hinduism.

Our *dharma* has two branches, *Samaj dharma* and *Sadhan dharma*...We are Hindus. Our Hindustan is preserved by the strength of *Samaj dharma*. While the *Sadhan dharma* is of the individual, its object is *Sadhan* and *Muktee* (Salvation). It is a hidden thing and one to be meditated upon. It has no connection whatever with society. It is a matter known to the *guru* and *shishya* only. A Hindu, so far as *sadhan* goes, can belong to any religion¹⁹.

19. Kaj Baago, op. cit. p. 124

Brahmabandhav is raising an important question when he separates cultural Hinduism from religious Hinduism. He is in effect affirming that it is possible to accept cultural Hinduism without accepting Hinduism as religious truth. His deep involvement with the national struggle for freedom had impelled him to identify himself as fully as possible with his country, Hindustan, the land of the Hindus. But, the question he raised about the possibility of separating culture from religion is very important and cannot be understood as the employment of a compromise between his nationalistic commitment and his firm faith in the Christian religion. Though such a separation as Brahmabandhav advocates between a man's religion and his life in society is not easily understood and accepted, there exists clear parallels in the development of Christianity itself.

Christianity was born in the semitic culture of Palestine. The early Christian communities had its membership drawn not only from the Jews but also from other communities. The Apostle Paul, in his writings, often spoke of the 'New Way' as destroying all distinctions between men, whether social, religious or political. There was no longer Jew, Roman or Pagan, but only one brotherhood. The Christian could be Jew among Jews, Roman among Romans and Greek among Greeks. It was not a cultural or political or religious grouping. The Apostolic preaching in all parts of the world, was conscious of the fact that the message of the Gospel transcended both historical and cultural forms. Pauline preaching was characterised by the effort to be "all things to all men". Efforts were made to reduce the Christian message to Jewish forms, but, such efforts to limit the scope of the Gospel was not only resisted but condemned by the early church in the gathering of the Apostles in Jerusalem. The universal scope of the Gospel, enabled it to take root in different lands and cultures without doing violence to man and his past heritage. The birth of culturally different Churches point to this and the situation of Christianity is not different today considering the number of individual Churches that form the Universal Church. Another parallel is the development of Greek culture

which was originally very closely linked with Greek religion. As Robin Boyd points out: "Gradually the bonds were loosened, philosophy became a separate discipline, mythology became part of literature rather than religion, and finally Greek religion died, while cultural Hellenism, philosophic, scientific, literary and artistic, merged with the Christian tradition and is still very much alive today"²⁰. If history of the development of both religion and culture point to the possibility of the distinction Brahmabandhav makes between the two, Brahmabandhav seems to be pointing for the first time to a fact of utmost importance for the development both of the Christian Church and of Indian, Hindu culture.

Brahmabandhav wanted to remain a Hindu in his social life and thinking and he felt that nothing in this would contradict his Christian faith. In expressing his faith, he used forms and categories which he had inherited through Hinduism, including the Vedanta. "He believed in the Catholic Church, whereby he meant a universal Church which excludes no man from its membership and includes all truth." But he demanded that the Indian manifestation of this Church must have a truly indigenous character. At the same time he is concerned that the reality of the religious experience of millions of Hindus for thousands of years should not be denied. Yet, for Brahmabandhav Hinduism remained a stage on the journey to something more ultimate, and the final stage is found only in Christ. He remained committed to keeping intact the deposit of faith given to the Church. In none of his writings do we find any criticism of this basic faith as found in the Bible, or even of the Thomistic system, which he appears to have accepted without question. What he attacked was the foreign clothing given to Christianity in India.

It is the foreign clothing of the Catholic faith that has chiefly prevented our country men from perceiving its universal nature. Catholicism has downed the European garb in India. Our Hindu brethren cannot see the subtlety and sanctity of our divine religion

because of its hard coating of Europeanism...when the Catholic church in India will be dressed...in Hindu garments then will our countrymen perceive that she elevates man to the Universal Kingdom of Truth by stooping down to adapt herself to his racial peculiarities²¹.

Difficulties with church authority arose when Brahmabandhav decided to become a Catholic Sanyasin, put on saffron robes and went to church. He had to point to the Madurai tradition set by de Nobili before the bishop could give him permission to attend church service and was permitted to wear Saffron clothes. Again when he decided to establish a Sanyasi order with two types of monks, those who would live as Yogis and by their experience and thinking contribute to an Indian theology, and those who would be engaged in preaching and social work, he encountered ecclesiastical objections. He was in fact permitted by the Bishop of Nagpur to build his Ashram in that diocese, but the intervention of the Apostolic delegate caused the permission to be withdrawn. In the eyes of most of the Indian Christians and particularly that of church authorities Brahmabandhav had gone too far.

Brahmabandhav attacked the westernisation of the Indian Church in a series of articles about the same time. He criticised the missionaries because they neither knew nor cherished Indian philosophy. He accused Indian christians of being un national and declared that the Christian community in India was without any strength because it had isolated itself from the life and thoughts of the nation. The missionaries, he claimed, were just tools of Western imperialism. "First comes the missionary, then comes the Resident, lastly comes the Regiment"²². The Apostolic delegate intervened and warned Catholics against subscribing for or reading the magazine. Thus the lack of understanding and consideration from higher ecclesiastical authorities pushed to the brink "the greatest Indian who had found his way to Christ".

21. Ibid., p. 69

22. Robin Boyd, op. cit., p. 83

The Roman hierarchy shattered his life's work, paralysed his missionary force and shut his evangelical mouth. The real issue in this case is not the granting of a permission, the closing of a work or a conflict, but the principles involved, the Western apparel of the Church, the purity of doctrine, truth and their relation to ecclesiastical authority²³.

In the end Brahmabandhav met the same tragic fate as the person of Christ in whom he had 'deposited' his faith. British colonialists imprisoned him, critics described his attempts a failure; the majority of Catholics were either suspicious or indifferent to his ideas; the Church disowned him. Death came unexpectedly and prematurely at the age of 46. Nationalism claimed him; Hinduism owned him up.

His body was carried by Hindus to the place of cremation, followed by thousands of nationalists. Brahmabandhav was a national hero in the eyes of many and the news of his death spread through special editions of newspapers. When a Catholic priest reached the place of cremation wanting to bury Brahmabandhav according to Christian rites, the Hindus had already lighted the pyre. Thus he, who had been born a Hindu, was also cremated like a Hindu and with Hindu rites. Probably this was in accordance with Brahmabandhav's own thinking, for he was — as he himself said — ... a Christian Hindu²⁴.

Conclusion

The sad, premature and tragic end to the life of this great Indian Christian and nationalist was a great blow to the development of an Indian Church. Brahmabandhav was one of the greatest pioneers of Indian Christian theology and led the way for a Christian participation in Indian Nationalism. Both these contributions were rejected by the Church authority of his time. He was a pioneer and like every pioneer he was ahead of his time.

23. Kaj Baago. op. cit., p. 47

24. A. M. Mundadan, op. cit., p. 24

Both in the practical matter of dress and way of life and more especially in his massive effort to use Hindu ways of thought for the expression of the Christian faith, he was an outstanding pioneer. He attempted the synthesis of philosophy and theology, Eastern and Western, not by evaporating concepts but by crystalizing the message of the Catholic Church in the Vedanta solution of Sankaracharya. In attempting this task Brahmabandhav fulfilled the prophetic task of a Christian theologian. He could not confine himself to the established and transmitted message of the Gospel. He did critically evaluate what was handed down to him. He believed that the form (Western) in which the faith was presented to India was found to face rejection. Risking official Church rejection, he took upon himself the task of translating the message of the Gospel in terms and categories intelligible to Hindu India. His faith in Christ and his commitment to Indian Christianity left him no choice. Even in the face of opposition from the Church authority, he stuck to his task, paid the price for the boldness of his faith and suffered rejection from an uncaring Church.

In this task of building a truly Indian theology, Brahmabandhav hardly had any previous Christian effort to guide him. Hence, it was but natural that there could be limitations to what he created as an Indian theology. As M. M. Thomas points out: "He was so much a Thomist in the deepest levels of his philosophical and theological thinking, that he could think of an indigenous expression of the faith only within a 'Thomistic frame-work' through a Thomistic evaluation and transformation of Indian philosophy and religion"²⁵. He may be found fault with for having "tried to press Indian thought into the Thomistic mould, in the process of adapting it to Christianity"²⁶. Brahmabandhav's effort to separate religion from culture is also questionable. Though probably he would not have gone to the extent of embracing the whole of Hindu cultural heritage uncritically if he had not faced stiff resistance to his Indianizing effort, he does not give

25. Kaj Baago, *op. cit.*, p. 49

26. M. M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 110

attention to the intricate relationship between culture and religion." The Word of God is a double edged weapon. Even as it is valid to believe with Brahmabandhav that the Word spoken to man can find an indigenous expression in every culture, it is also true that the same message moulds and purifies the life of the society. The Christian message, in encountering the Indian reality, should have been allowed to play the role it did for the development of Greek culture. Even as the message of the Gospel transcends culture, it also elevates culture to its values. Brahmabandhav, in his eagerness to develop an Indian Christian theology, went to the extreme of not questioning some of the ancient practices and customs like the caste-system within the Hindu culture of India, that could not be compatible with the precepts of the Gospel.

Another major limitation in Brahmabandhav's theology was his effort to characterise the relation between Hinduism and Christianity as a relation between natural and supernatural religion. "This disabled him from seeing the extent both of the perversions of idolatry and the potency of redeeming grace operating at depth in Hinduism and also leads him to misunderstand revelation as supernatural extra to nature instead of as the encounter of Christ with the totality of man and human life."²⁷ He did not also take into account the plurality of the Indian context. India of his time had already evolved from being a Hindu society into a multi-religious, multi-racial entity. Though predominantly Hindu, India could no longer deny the claims of these other groups for their own particular identity.

Though highly critical of the Westernised Church and though he had many conflicts with Church authority, Brahmabandhav accepted the discipline of the Roman Catholic Church and recognised the need for a visible and organised Church and for the regular ministry of the Word and Sacraments. His opposition to European theology was part of his general opposition to Europeanism.

Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya ventured into an unknown

27. Ibid., p. 110

field in the life of Christianity in India, and approached his task with bold faith, his faith never sagging even in the face of unconcern, lack of understanding and rejection from his own fellow-believers but his contribution to the faith in India remains a great pioneering effort. The sad reality is that he did not have the time to formulate and present his theology in a systematic way. What he has left behind are only bits and pieces of his thought mostly in the articles he wrote in the magazines he was associated with. The pioneering work he undertook had its own shortcomings. But considering the fact that his effort was a journey into an area that had not been explored to any great depth before him, his contribution towards the development of an authentically Indian Church is all the more to be appreciated.

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